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VIRGINIA'S INHERITANCE



By
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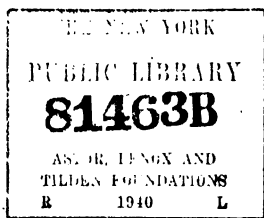
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VIRGINIA'S INHERITANCE

BY
COOKE DON-CARLOS

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VIRGINIA'S INHERITANCE

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VIRGINIA'S INHERITANCE

CHAPTER I

"Ariminta Grannis knew it all the time," asserted Miss Louisy.

"Hey?" queried deaf Ma Spangler. "Knowned what, Lou?"

"And she kept Ella Byrd working like a bond slave right up to the last minute, and then one rainy night sent her off. Ella didn't have nobody to go to, not knowing a soul in Sedgebury, for she had come from up Delmas-way. Her gran'pa had turned her out some months back."

Ma Spangler nodded encouragement and Miss Louisy went on:

"It was the same old story, like one of the 'lustrated pictures they sung at the Opery House. Jane Gates took me on some tickets her Lige got (he's quit his drinking and

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took to working steady. Lige is a good printer, if he'd let whiskey alone). The song was about a picture turned against the wall, and it was real pathetic, though I should think it would be mortifying to a girl to set there listening to such delicate subjects, with a young man. But, Mis' Spangler, girls ain't as modest as when you and me was brung up."

Miss Louisy bit off her thread and stuck her needle in the quilt they were quilting. Mrs. Spangler took off her thimble and picked up her ear-trumpet.

"I can't hear the half you say, Louisy Miller, when you rattle on so," she complained. "First you was a talkin' about Ella Byrd dyin' at the pore farm, and now you've switched off to the song at the Opery House, and when you was a gal. Do get back to Seth Byrd's gran'-daughter! I know he wore his wife and son to their graves with his meanness. What did Ella Byrd do when Ariminty turned her out in a storm?"

Miss Louisy stretched her cramped fingers and leaned back in her chair. They had been at work since one o'clock, and it was nearly half past five. The little sewing woman was glad

of a bit of chat and rest before she took the long walk back to town.

"Well, she walked the five miles to the poor farm, but, it being night and she not having any regular papers, the overseer wouldn't take her in. Finally she got into a hay mow, and when they found her next morning, she was laying all white and still, with a poor weazened baby girl wrapped up in her cloak.

"Of course, there was a great ter-do then, and Peter White got sandhill all round. His wife cried and took on, and said it would ruin them if it came out—and him only just appointed overseer! And the paupers was wrathful. Old Bijah Bales—he was a sailor up in the New England States, in Glos-ces-ter—said a verse about 'Old Floyd Ireson,' who the Marblehead women tarred and feathered and carried in a cart, because of his hard-heartedness; and there was talk of ridin' Peter on a rail."

"It's gettin' along toward six, Ma," warned Selma from the kitchen. Ma Spangler always mixed her own "sody" biscuits, no matter who was doing the cooking.

"Set the meat on the back of the stove,

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daughter, and don't hurry the pertaters. Go on, Louisy."

"Well'm, I was there helping with the fall sewing (as things was behind and there warn't no sewing paupers, to speak of). We got the poor thing to bed, and sent to town for Doctor Whitsett. But she didn't come to till about sunset; then she talked a little about her carpet-sack and said to name the baby Virginia, and then she sort of smiled and reached up as if she saw something, and was gone."

Mrs. Spangler shook her head pityingly.

"I had set by her all that day, making some slips for the baby," Miss Louisy continued, "and I did what was to be done afterwards. It's curious how church-going folks can read in their Testaments all about the Master's dealings with the publicans and sinners, and then cast the sinning and the suffering off. I'd be afraid that at the end of things I'd hear, 'Depart, workers of iniquity; I never knew you.'"

Miss Louisy rose and, setting the quilt frame against the wall, took her wraps from the plump bed. Selma called again sharply. From the kitchen came the smell of coffee and frying ham.

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"Come at eight to-morrow, Louisy," said her employer, hurrying kitchenward, and Miss Louisy went out into the darkness, sniffing wistfully for there was no fire in her room over the millinery store, and only baked beans and tea for supper.

Beyond the stretch of ice-patched fields, a dull red fired the west, and the dark trees and roofs of Sedgebury silhouetted against it added to the dreariness of the scene.

It was a mile from the Spanglers' home to Main Street, and it seemed another up-town. As she plodded through the sleet and mud of the February evening, her limbs numbing under her insufficient clothing, she felt curiously aloof from her own personality, as if she were but a part of the cold desolateness of the twilight.

Coming to a turn in the road where the street lights were visible, and where she got glimpses of fire-lit interiors, and tantalizing whiffs of supper as some kitchen door opened, her low spirits gave place to a more cheery frame of mind, and declaring: "When I get a house, I'm always going to leave the shades up nights, so folks can look in at the lights and warmth,"

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and she began to hum softly to herself.

Although Louisy had always worked hard for mere sustenance, she never said "if I had"; it was always "when." She was *sure*, firmly believing that if she had faith and worked on, she would some day own a nice home, though at forty-five her prospects were no more promising than when, an orphan of sixteen, she began "sewing round." Still, hope lights us far along this rough earth-track, and, as the little sewing-woman said, she "took a sight o' comfort in believing." "All our needs are going to finally be met," she would chirp. "Our Lord said that whatever things we wanted, if we believed, they'd come. He said that to the poor common folks that followed Him, and John says that He ain't slack concerning His promises.

"Tea and buttered toast will taste mighty good," she told herself. "I'll stop at the bakery for some stale bread. Now, warn't it onery of me to feel bad because Mis' Spangler didn't bid me to supper! Louisy Miller, if you did put in a extry hour on that quilt, it is mean to give a thing and then expect some return. Lawsy, I wish Spring was here! It does

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seem winter's going to hold out forever, and I know my coal won't last over two weeks more. Since Moskovitz has painted the Millinery, he wants two dollars more rent, and that new trimmer from St. Louis will give it if I don't. Well, coal or no coal, I've just got to buy a linsey-woolsey petticoat with this here dollar of Mis' Spangler's. We sure do have to hustle some ourselves, even though the Lord *does* provide. But though I've run mighty close to shore at times, I ain't never stranded yet."

By this time she had reached the business part of the town, and felt thankful for the protection afforded by the wooden store-awnings.

Baker Herman gave her a hearty "Good evening."

"How's the baby, Herman?" she queried, as she stood a moment beside his rusty stove before making her three-cent purchase.

Herman beamed. "He breathes nice now, though the doctor said if you had not come so quick in the night and help Lena with him, he would haf choke."

Miss Louisy nodded.

"I'm glad," she said simply.

Her loaf wrapped, the baker reached under

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the counter. "There is yet one coffee cake mit raisins in it for my kindt friend." And Miss Louisy went out hugging the warm, spicy parcel happily.

Her room was neat with the painful bareness of poverty. Two braided oval rugs lay on its floor, and the little stove shone. There were some rush-bottomed chairs. The old wooden rocker and the little bed were gay in patchwork, and turkey-red calico curtained the two windows, and the shelf that formed Miss Louisy's wardrobe.

When a fire had been kindled, the little chamber took on a cozy, homelike air, and Miss Louisy pottered cheerily about in carpet-slippers, drawing the table up to the fire, setting her pork and beans out, with a saucer of vinegar for a relish, and then, with a loving glance at the coffee cake lying in state on her best plate, she set aside the teakettle and, regardless of expense, measured three tablespoonsful of coffee into her little tin coffee pot.

Supper over and the dishes washed, she sat awhile rocking cozily.

"I just wonder," she mused, "if Heaven

won't be something like this, instead of all hard gold streets and angels in white nighties. Just a homey sort of place where tired folks can come in out of the dark and cold, and God says, 'Set down, child, and rest yourself.' My, but it's nice to be home! What a unthankful critter I am, to be sure! Worrying about everything, when all you have to do is to know you will be took care of, and not go round just admiring to be miserable. That's like setting in a thorn-bush and hollering it hurts, when right across the road's a nice, soft grass."

When she had undressed and tied up her head in an old brown veil, Miss Louisy said her prayers by firelight, and then had her usual little "say" in bed; for, like the Psalmist, she "communed with God" on her bed, telling over all the small happenings of her day as if she spoke with some friend, deriving much comfort from this habit of her lonely life. As consciousness floated away upon sleep's misty sea, she muttered: "Lord, I can't see I've got on much to-day, and maybe I've skipped some of Your chores; but I've patched and quilted to Thy glory as good as I could, and if anything

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has been overlooked, You just say, 'My ignorant child has done all she knowed, and angels can't do no more, though their way is bright and glorious, and hers just common and ordinary.' ”

CHAPTER II

The passing of the years brought scarcely a ripple upon the surface of Sedgebury life. The town seemed sunken, somnambulant, into some quiet valley of yesterday, where change came not. A few old faces missing, a few young faces added, completed the tale. Save for the building of a new hotel and Lawyer Elwell's two-story brick house, there was little news in fourteen years, unless you count the fact that Mis' Grannis had bought a new silk dress, that the ministers at the two churches had changed, and that word had come from up Delmas-way that old Seth Byrd had died, leaving his ten thousand dollars to the Masonic orphans' home, and that out at the poor farm they called his granddaughter "Virginia."

In October of that year came Virginia's fourteenth birthday. It was Monday, and she lay face downward on the hay in the barn-loft, crying and kicking in impotent rage, gulping

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sobs shaking her. After the sobs had ceased she fell to watching a dusty sunbeam straggling through a chink in the wall. For a while it lay, a band of gold, across the hay, then vanished suddenly as it had come, bringing to the little girl a cheering thought. "Anyway, I won't have to stay here always, either. The sunbeam got out of this dusty loft, and when I'm big, I'll go away and work for folks, sewing like Miss Louisy Miller does, and old Peter White can't never find me."

Overpowered by fresh remembrances of her woes, the tears flowed again; but she took firm hold of herself, and finally sat up sorrow-stained, but calm.

"You mustn't go on this way," she remonstrated. "You've nobody to show you how to do, and for you to give in and have tantrums is like little Peter or poor old crazy Sa' Jane."

Rising resolutely, she shook the hay from her dress and sat down on a box to review the causes of her unhappiness. Though she was unaware of it, they extended far back to her very beginning on this earth.

The County Commissioners had seriously reprimanded Peter White for mistreating her

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mother; yet, as no other farmer in Sedge County seemed to want the overseership, he had stayed at the farm all these years. But the affair created feeling against him. Perhaps his own conscience caused him discomfort, too, and this, added to the fact that the child was sickly and needed Minnie Todd's constant care, caused him to detest it, and he growled continually that this took one of his best weavers from the loom, and by giving poor Minnie a much needed change, set a bad example to the other paupers, for the overseer was convinced that the county poor should be severely kept down, and often proclaimed, "There warn't a goin' to be no pamperin' of paupers round that farm."

As Virginia grew older, her pretty ways diverted the attention of visitors from the young Whites, and, what was of more moment to the avaricious overseer, the incidental pennies; and so he scolded and harassed her on every pretext.

Troubles loom large on the horizon of a child; yet this was no ordinary child who sat in the loft struggling for self-mastery, but a temperamental, sensitive little creature, in whose

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heart the stigma of illegitimacy and pauperism burned deep as a galley slave brand.

On the previous Sunday Peter had come to dinner out of humor because the rain had wetted some hay he intended moving, and furious because dinner was not ready, though it lacked five minutes of the time when Uncle Johnny Beck usually rang the big porch bell.

Virginia, setting the table, sang softly to herself, unaware of her enemy's proximity until he strode in and bade her "shut that noise." The startled child turned, the last note of the song slipping out despite her. Shaking her by the shoulder, the overseer thrust her out of his way and went into the living room. The noise brought Mrs. White from the kitchen, where she and Aunt Silvy, an aged negress, were dishing up. She found Virginia staunching the blood from a cut forehead, where she had fallen against the table corner, and sending the little girl to Aunt Silvy, she roundly berated her husband for his brutality.

When dinner had been eaten in sulky silence, Peter went out onto the porch to smoke. Here Virginia followed him, her face white, but de-

terminated, under its bandage. She spoke fearlessly.

"Mr. White, you ain't no right to hurt me; I hadn't done nothin' at all, and I ain't got nobody to stand up for me. If you ever do it again, I'll sure go to the Commissioners and show my wounds and tell them what a tyrant' you are. There's other things, too, I know," she continued calmly, "about you leaving the log in the corn wagon when it was weighed, and how much of the butter don't go down in the dairy books. But I won't be a tell-tale, only if you abuse me."

Peter's throat was dry, rage and apprehension struggling for mastery in his shallow, cunning mind. Then he broke out hoarsely:

"I'll skin you alive, you little devil! Who set you spyin', you—;" but he bit his tongue, for around the house came his crony, Jezreel Sands, with such a soft whistle and innocent look that the overseer was sure he had been eavesdropping. Jezreel was his nearest friend, but he had no desire to continue this dialogue before him; so, pretending to be still unaware of him, Peter changed his tone.

"Now, little gals mustn't have tantrums.

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You be a good gal, and I'll forgive your sass. Take this nice apple and run along now and help Ma White." And he drew a jenneting from his pocket and thrust it into the girl's hand.

As she ran inside, Virginia dropped it on the porch floor, and it rolled toward the visitor, who caught it and, after a swipe across his coat-sleeve, began to munch it, while the overseer exclaimed against the ingratitude of paupers.

That night Virginia had felt very brave and important as she reviewed her actions on her cot; but before the next the overseer had made her pay dearly for the short-lived triumph.

The Sedgebury Baptist Sunday School was to have a "speaking" that very week, and Virginia was a contestant for the gold dollar that Lawyer Elwell had offered for the best elocutionary effort. But alas for Virginia! The morning after the encounter she was late to breakfast, and excused herself by explaining that her snarled hair delayed her. The overseer looked up menacingly from his bowl of mush and milk.

"I'll have nary nother meal waitin' on *that*

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Missy; there'll be no pamperin' of paupers round here if I know it. After breakfast, Uncle Johnny, you cut that mop off."

For a moment there was silence around the long oil-clothed table, save for the clatter of the dishes. Then a murmur of disapproval rose from the women's side, Mrs. White loudly protesting from her end of the table; and old Johnny Beck, who in the eighties had been the dandy barber of Sedgebury, raised his cracked voice.

"Sufferin' rattlesnakes, Peter White, that ha'r is the gal's one beauty! You can't bob it off like a boy's."

Peter sneered. "Oh, I can't? Well, I wonder who's overzeer here, you or me? Miry Mimms, you go git the shears. An' Johnny Beck, your tobaccy is stopped a month for insubordination."

Virginia sprang up from the table with a shriek as the feeble-minded girl shuffled in with the big scissors in her hand. Despite the protesting cries of "It's a shame," and the intercession of Mrs. White, Peter snatched the shears from the awestruck Miry, and seizing

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Virginia prepared to cut off her long braids. But Uncle Johnny shambled up and caught his hand.

"Naw, naw, if it's got to come off, I'll do it myself right."

Gently and carefully he trimmed the hair from the head of the sobbing little girl, who snatched up the fallen beauties and fled to the barn loft, bleating like the poor shorn lamb she was.

This was what had sent Virginia to the loft in tears on her birthday. And a very cruel birthday present she found the shorn braids. She rescued them from the hay where, in the excess of her bereavement, she had thrown them, and sat with them lying mournfully in her lap as the autumn morning waned.

Somewhat comforted by the sunbeam, the storm of grief and anger passed, and when a little grey mouse came out and, emboldened by her silence, began to frisk about, she could laugh at his antics.

"Well, Miss Louisy said last Sunday at Sunday School that if our religion is any good at all, it must be used every day, and that God loves us and helps us just as sure as a good

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king would. Yet it don't seem hardly fair to bother Him, for everybody is always beggin' things from Him; but if He takes an interest in the sparrers and the lilies, like the lesson said He does, why maybe, 'cause I ain't got nobody to help me, He won't mind my beggin' a little, too."

So, clasping her hands over the braids, Virginia prayed:

"O Lord, make Peter White do me better, and keep me from hatin' him so bad and from mindin' about my hair and the girls in town callin' me Virgie of the Poor-Farm; and help me get away from here and to say my piece good, because you know I do need that dollar awful bad, and I never had more'n a quarter in my life. And make me a good little girl. Amen."

The last sentence of the prayer was conventional, but the rest was certainly from the heart. And though it was but a childish cry, a small hand stretched gropingly for the light, the young petitioner arose and went away much comforted.

CHAPTER III

Sedgebury was literally rioting in gossip, for which there was undoubtedly ample cause. Miss Louisy Miller had come into a fortune through the death of a distant unknown relative who had worked and saved passionately all his life, bequeathing his hoard only because he could not take it with him.

Possessed of a bank account, Miss Louisy denied herself no luxury known to Sedgebury standards. She bought a purple feathered hat, a black silk dress for best, and a beaded plush cape whose elegance was the delight and envy of every woman in town. She also bought the old Jarred house, adding nothing to the walnut furniture and splint-bottomed chairs which Jansey Jarred had left behind him, and, once comfortably installed, found herself much in demand socially.

On the evening of the Baptist Sunday School's oratorical contest, she sat on the plat-

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form with two other Lady Aiders and the Reverend Silas Bender, to act as one of the judges, and, having gained her ideas of oratory from school recitations in the Fifth Reader some thirty years back, was much flustered by the honor thrust upon her.

The tin reflectors lit the long room indifferently, and the pot-bellied stove warmed it indifferently, too; for, being in the basement, it was damp, and smelt of mouldy matting and coal-oil. It was furnished with high-backed yellow pews handed down when the church reached the dignity of aisle carpets, and the new varnished seats, to which members stuck on summer mornings when the Reverend Silas was more prolix than usual, and when bees buzzed in from out of doors to hint of elder-blooms and clover. 'Twas then one slipped away to some dim place where the breeze sang through the ferns and the rasping voice faded, until the worshiper came, with the nasal Doxology, to pry himself free in sticky humiliation.

The teachers marshalled their classes, all distressingly immaculate in Sunday best, and as the minister sounded the bell on the table before him, their rustlings and whisperings

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ceased, and the organ struck up "When he Cometh," in which all joined.

The program began with Ariadne Jones, just home from Delmas Seminary, reciting "You Put no Flowers on My Papa's Grave." Aby Moskovitz, the tailor's son, gave "Horatius," and when Katie Yeargin, who had studied elocution in "St. Louie," came out in white with her hair down and wailed through "Curfew Shall Not Ring To-night," there was much stamping, and one excited youth yelled, "Rah for Kate!" but was immediately suppressed by his scandalized family.

When Deacon Collins, with a pious roll of his pale eyes, at last droned out "Virginia Byrd," it had grown late and the children were getting cross; but everybody knew Virginia's history, and curiosity held the restless audience in their seats. From the rear of the room, where the paupers sat, came the child, white-faced and shrinking, her coarse shoes pounding loudly up the aisle.

"Jest see the pauper youngun hold up her head!" whispered a woman to her husband.


"What a noisy, unladylike piece the gal is," said the judge on Miss Louisy's left, and, as

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she passed, a girl told her beau from Delmas, "It's Virgie from the poor farm. The idea of letting paupers compete! If I looked like that, I'd certainly hide in the cellar."

This comment, delivered with a snicker, was louder than its author intended, and lashed the sensitive child like a whip. But her shorn head was erect as she stood before them in her purple calico, and her grey eyes looked steadily over the stolid audience. She waited a moment, and then began "The Legend of Brengenz."

She seemed to know intuitively the few gestures needed, and made the fine old poem ring so convincingly that many found themselves leaning forward, breathlessly following the race of the gallant maid who saved her city. There had been nothing like this in Sedgebury before, and Sedgebury folks forgot the age and garb of the speaker. They forgot the dripping discomfort of coughs and colds, the ill ventilated room and the lateness of the hour, and followed on, on through the dark mountain passes with the stars overhead, until the young voice ceased and they came back to earth again, with generous applause. And the irrepressi-



ble youth but voiced the sentiments of the audience when he made a louder hooray than he had given Katie and cried, "Give th' prize to Virgie of the Pore-Farm!"

The judges were not long in concurring with the audience, and Miss Louisy laid the gold-piece in Virginia's hand and, kissing her flushed cheek, vowed it was just like the theatre.

"Virg done real well, didn't she, though that warn't the piece I picked out," exclaimed Mrs. White, affable in her plaid shawl and puffy green bonnet, as she bustled up to the platform to shake hands with the minister. She extended a pleasant, though cautious, greeting to Louisy, as if uncertain as to how the ex-seamstress took her altered fortunes. Seeing that her quiet manner was unchanged, the Overseer's wife gave her a cordial farewell.

"Well, goodnight, Louisy, and thankee for the prize for Virg. She's a good, book-lovin' critter, and it's a shame she don't get no more schoolin', for with just a little learnin', I wouldn't wonder if she'd make a ellycution teacher, if she had the chanct."

Home and snug in bed, Miss Louisy had

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still before her the ardent face of the little pauper, and before she went to sleep, she decided that Virginia of the Poor-Farm should have a "chanct."

CHAPTER IV

The sponsors of Sedgebury should have named the town "Rivergirt," for the Indian River coils about it like a serpent, fawning, but insidious, like all of the species. When the spring rains fall, it steals from its lair between shallow banks and devours houses, barns, stock, and sometimes men, covering everything in its wake with a slimy trail. Yet at sunset, when the spires and chimneys of the settlement across the river are gilded by the after-glow, it lies a beautiful waterway, stretching into a sea of golden splendor where water and horizon meet, with flecks of white, woolly clouds in the far-off purpling sky. The trees stand mirrored in placid beauty, the tinkling cow-bells echo faintly across it, and smoke curls up from the dark little houses in pinky wreaths toward the first timid stars.

When night's spangled mantle hides all but the bridge it turns to liquid silver in the star-shine. Here noiseless phantoms flit to and fro,

casting vague shadows down upon the water, whence the reflected lamps sparkle like hoarded jewels in a velvet casket. Beyond the bridge flare the lights of the tall stone mill; and the water, restrained by the dam, murmurs and roars as it conquers the resistance and leaps down to fall into a seething pool ere it takes again its old quiet flow. Then on away southward it gently laps the fertile valley fields, night-lulled into quiet and peace.

Below the knoll behind the poor farm, the river lay calm and shining, one grey April morning. The sweet alyssum on Ella Byrd's grave was beginning to sprout anew, lifting tiny green hands to the warming air. The red roofs of the farm showed sleek with rain, and the busy birds twittered about them, intent on their nest-building. An air of quietude and desertion over the fields told that the ground was yet too wet for Peter to set his paupers working there, though all who were able were hard at it in the small harness shop lately set up by the energetic overseer.

To get money and keep it was Peter White's sole aim in life. Love, hate, birth, death were all but casual interruptions of this concen-

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trated effort. Had he lived in the days of chivalry, the motto blazoned on his shield would surely have been the cry of Iago, "Put money in thy purse."

There was a hum of voices from the women's side, and the pound of looms within the carpet room. Blind Minnie Todd sat at one loom, and at another a strong young country girl, who had been there from childhood owing to a supposedly inherited infirmity. Picking over rags in a corner crouched a few feeble crones, gabbling as they cut and tacked the gay bits of cloth.

The carpet room was Peter's pride and profit, for it not only supplied the farm with floor coverings, but the town as well; and the shrewd overseer had stipulated in his contract with the county that he should have a percentage of all proceeds from the poor-farm industries. Hence, he thrust his head in at the door this morning with an approving nod, and his voice was less raucous than usual, because two of the Commissioners stood behind him.

"Miry Mimms, you go an' tell Mis' White to let Virginia come down to the settin'-room; and tell that gal 'none of her impudence.'"

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A fat, vacant-faced girl shambled out into the hall toward the overseer's rooms. They were upstairs and overlooked the Sedgebury road, that Mrs. White might miss none of the pageant of the life marching past, for the highway was her stage, and the "men and women" who traveled it, players.

"Them Missioners is come to see about Virginy," the messenger said bluntly.

Melindy White laid aside the small dress she was making and turned slowly about in her chair, her snuff-stick drooping from one corner of her mouth.

Hazel-el-poni Sands said that two things would make Melindy recognizable even in the Sahary desert—her snuff-stick and her sewing. The first was a wonderfully carved "snuff-dip" of althea wood, with which old Jancy Jemmison, who had come West in the forties as an ox-driver, kept her supplied; the second being succeeding cottonade slips for the little Whites, who seemed endlessly succeeding one another.

"My stars, Miry Mimms, how you skeered me! Don't ye ever come a-bustin' in on a critter like that, bawlin' like a lost heifer. You

ought to mind your manners. Why in Sam Hill didn't ye knock?"

Miry Mimms, slow-footed, feeble-minded, with assets in the way of Titian hair and rosy cheeks, only grinned, and, by way of apology, repeated her statement in a lower key. Molified by this concession, Mrs. White asked with less asperity in her voice, "Where be they?"

"In the settin'-room with the overseer, and he says Virg ain't to be sassy."

Mrs. White, unaware of the encounter on the porch and Virginia's threats, did not recognize this as a warning to the young pauper not to tattle. She looked incredulous.

"You limb! Did Peter really say that, or did you make it?"

The girl sidled out, pursing her lips and nodding her head silently.

"Of all things! What does that man mean, anyhow? Virg is curious, I'll 'low, but she knows how to behave to her elders. I learned her manners myself, and I reckon I know as much about how to bring up a gal as any pernickety old maid what's a-puttin' on airs over a little money." And, grumbling to herself, the

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overseer's wife shambled into the next room to release Virginia from her task of getting the latest little White to sleep.

CHAPTER V

The overseer stamped up and down on the new yellow and green rag carpet until Melindy began to wonder if the yellow yarn in her basket would match when she came to darn out the traces of his angry footsteps; but, knowing by long years of efface living with Peter that remonstrance would make his stamp the harder, she leaned back in her wooden rocker and possessed her soul in such patience as she could muster until her husband's irate sputterings became articulate.

"It's a dum mean trick, that's what it is, and I'd as leave as not tell 'em so to their faces. Here we've had all the trouble of raisin' that youngun from knee high to a duck—from the puniest brat that ever yelped to the all-firedest sassy piece that ever said her a, b, c's; and now that she's big enough to help you with the kids and be some use round the house, here comes that Miller woman with her 'doption papers. What in Heck a ole maid wants with a stuckup

pauper gal is more than I can say. Why, that gal will turn up her nose at Louisy in a month, just as she has allers done at the farm,—as proud as a peacock! Yes, she's a high and mighty one, I can tell ye, Melindy. It seems to me sometimes as if she knowed—"

Mrs. White laid down her sewing and gazed curiously at her husband. He had broken squarely off in the midst of his diatribe against the adoption of Virginia, and stood biting his lip as if he had said more than he intended.

"Knowed what, Peter?" Melindy's voice was querulous. She knew that he had let out all he intended and was vexed at saying so much, and although she well knew the uselessness of trying to cross-examine her sullen mate, she persisted ineffectually.

"What was you agoin' to say Virg seemed to know, honey?"

Peter was his own man again, and the guard was up.

"Aw, nothin'"—explosively—"I never did see anything like the way a woman catches ye up on every little thing. Why don't you wait till I'm through? I's just thinkin' the gal thought herself too good for us and wouldn't

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ever come out here again to her old friends when she got off,—not if she knowed it.”

Behind this empty verbiage, Peter gradually edged out of the room and hurried off, getting safely out of fire, leaving his consort burning with unsatisfied curiosity and the truly feminine determination to get out of him later what he really meant.

Peter was able to postpone the business of Virginia's adoption well into May, by urging upon the Commissioners his wife's poor health and the shortness of help at the farm. Indeed, Mrs. White's recurrent semi-invalidism was a handle upon which the overseer hung many things, though these indispositions never advanced beyond the necessity for an occasional lump of magnesia for heartburn and an annual consumption of home-made "bitters." The whole farm indulged in a similar course of treatment, however, in the spring, as sassafras tea was good for poor blood and Peter's purse, for he was allowed so much for the paupers' "keep," and sassafras dug in the woods was cheaper than twenty-cent coffee.

Thus, for two long months, Virginia remained suspended, like the prophet, in uncer-

tainty as to her fate, and lived in alternate bliss and woe as her vivid imagination portrayed the Commissioners accepting or rejecting Miss Louisy's application, for it seemed to her that her life would be perfect if she had a name and a home, dressed as other people dressed, and walked the world free from the blight of pauperism.

During the time of this uncertainty, many things transpired to keep the girl from town. One of the horses died, a wagon-tongue was split, and measles broke out.

But at last she set out, one morning toward the first of June, with Miry and Bijah Bales, who was a famous walker, for all that one leg had been left on the field of Antietam. It was sprinkling rain but Peter, true to his rule of "no pamperin'," kept no umbrellas for the paupers, and they arrived in town after their long walk damp and dispirited, and by the time the butter and eggs were delivered at Charley Spangler's on Main Street, Bijah, whose leg ached and made him cross, decided that they must hurry back to reach the farm by noon. So poor Virginia, without rest, or the long hoped-for visit with Miss Louisy, was forced to

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trail back over the long, muddy way, her shoes sopping and her thin garments hanging dripping upon her chilled little frame.

The next morning she awoke hoarse and feverish, and Mrs. White, whose experience had made her maternally wise gave her hot milk toast for breakfast and a dose of honey and nutmeg that made all the little Whites lick their chops and howl with vexation that they hadn't a sore throat, too.

When her morning chores had been listlessly dragged through, the overseer's wife sent the girl, with the ten-year-old twins, Annie Marilla and Steven Dydimus, to the woods, with a small basket of cold biscuit, gingerbread and apples, and the injunction to come home by Sands' "on a errant" and hunt calmus, for "them bit-ters."

Virginia's relations with the White children were amicable, for they considered her a superior being whose stories rivaled Scheherezade's. Indeed, to sit round the fire on a winter's evening and watch the shadows on the wall while Virginia told tales "out of her head" was a delightful experience; and her story of the Bell Witch and the Cat with seven tails were clas-

sics that sent her hearers to bed with cold shivers running down their little backs.

So, with exuberant yelling and scampering, the twins set off behind her with Buck, a yellow pup, yapping excitedly in their wake, sure Virg would invent some perfectly lovely game in the woods, and perhaps leave them her share of the lunch if she fell into one of her day-dreams by the creek, as she was likely to do when the sunlight sifted through the willows and lay in golden flecks on the dimpling waters.

Their anticipations were realized, for they played happily on the moss under the dense shade for some hours, and then Virginia told them a story.

By the time she had finished, it was two o'clock, and it was nearly five before the basket was filled and they started home.

They reached the dusty lane which stretched two hot miles between them and the farm when Virginia thought of Mrs. White's injunction to return by way of Sands' place to get Miss Hazel-el-poni Sands' receipt for raised cake. But here the children mutinied.

"Well, *you* can go to Sands if you want to," cried Annie. "I'm hot and plum wore out, and

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Pa ain't home, nuther, so we don't haf to, for Ma ain't a-goin' to whoop us if we don't."

Steve whined as he blinked his sore eyes. "And my stone bruise hurts, and Ma didn't mean me and Ann to go, anyway. You're the one to do errants, Virg. We're Overseer's folks and ain't on the county. Our Pa pays our keep, an' you have to earn yourn."

With this parting thrust they turned away, Steve whistling defiantly through the gap where his front teeth were out.

For a moment Virginia stood looking angrily after them. Then her face cleared, and she called imperiously, "Here, you!"

The White children always obeyed when she used that tone.

"Come back a minute."

They turned reluctantly, but she ran toward them, smiling.

"Come, don't be mean. I'll go to Sands all right, but you-all take Buck and the basket. It would take till moonrise with him traipsin' after every bird or squirrel, and I can't lug this heavy load way over there. Here, swing the basket on this stick, and be soldiers bearin' the palanquin of the Indian Queen." This was

reminiscent of a missionary lecture they had heard last winter.

Delighted with the new play and a little shamed by Virginia's good nature, the twins departed amicably, with Buck at heel, and Virginia climbed the rail fence, pushing through the elders and green blackberries.

Gay little sunflowers yellowed the fence corners, and meadow larks hopped among the streamers of young corn, so intent on their worm-stalking as to be oblivious of the proximity of the child whose brown gown and yellowish hair made her seem but a larger meadow-lark herself.

Virginia had never been to Sands' from that side of the creek, as their place lay north of the poor-house, and thither bound you always crossed the covered bridge over Cleary's creek and went up by a lane. So, after walking through the fields for half a mile, when she had climbed the fence into what she believed to be Sands' wood-lot, she really entered a much larger stretch of timber to the west of it, which skirted the river for miles.

The shady coolness was grateful to the tired child, so she followed the creek to where it made

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a little pool under a rocky ledge, and, taking off her shoes and stockings, sat bathing her feet in its shallows and wiggling her toes delightedly on its sandy bottom, in defiance of crawdads and watersnakes.

Through the lipping leaves she saw the sunshine, like a misty gold veil, between her and the blue sky, though no arrow of light pierced the thicket. She could hear the sweet, high call of the phœbe bird, and a thrush trilled in the tree-top above her, where a soft-voiced little breeze sang lullabies all the long golden afternoon.

Re-shod, Virginia wandered down the fern-marged stream, watching the darting minnows and smiling to see a maternal craw lead her babies ashore for a walk. Now she turned aside to tap on a hollow log to see the striped lizards run up and down, as did their brethren of the famous Elfin Hill.

On she went through a land of fairy dreams, now crossing on stones where the placid water scarcely rippled, now joyously coming upon a tiny fall above which some dead tree curved up-turned roots, whence maidenhair leaned to

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bathe its tresses above tiny blue pinflowers half hidden in the moss.

The shadows lengthened as she wandered, her heart attune to the symphonies of wood and water; and it seemed, when she noted a sun-beam piercing the leafy canopy above her and lying gamboge on the green moss, as if God had put His finger down and said, "This is mine."

Virginia had long since decided that she was lost and must keep on until she could leave the wood by some path or clearing. The tinkle of cow-bells and the far-off ring of an ax persuaded her she was nearing the edge of the timber and inspired her with hopes of being soon set on her way again; but when she had emerged from the trees, she found it was sunset, and that the river lay far below her, shining in the ambient light, a glittering girdle for the green wheat fields beyond.

She was on a bluff far from the poor-farm, and the spires and roofs of Sedgebury lay eastward. This was an unknown country.

Virginia thrilled with the explorer's joy, and only the menace of Peter's wrath deterred her

from lingering to enjoy the landscape. Turning reluctantly from the sunset glories of water and sky, she soon discovered a faint path winding along the edge of the bluff and leading from the river, to be at last lost in a grassy lane over-arched by trees and obstructed by undergrowth.

The crimson and gold of the sky melted into somber violet. The lane lay in deep shadowy vista far before her. Faint stars began to prick the deepening sky; a whippoorwill called plaintively from the thicket, and fireflies flashed up about her path.

At last she stopped, not in Sedgebury highway, into which she had hoped the lane would lead, but before a high and rusty iron gate, sagging on broken hinges between stone griffins. A rust-eaten fence stretched away on either side, enclosing a yard set thickly with trees and shrubs. Inside, she found a creeper-mantled, two-storied house of faded red brick, with a long gallery encasing one side of it, its windows hidden by wooden shutters. The rail of the balcony over the door lay in rotten splinters on the broad stone steps, and in the fast-falling twilight Virginia discerned that

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they, like the gateway, were guarded by griffins of crumbling stone.

Despite the strangeness and the hour, her heart throbbed with joy that was half fearful. So romantic it seemed to come upon this unknown mansion! Unknown; and yet it appeared to fit into her dreams, and to be familiar and dear!

Stepping carefully over the slippery grass, matting the gravelled walk, she passed beneath tall bushes of lilac and *crêpe* myrtle. A few worm-eaten rosebushes had straggled into bloom, and the faded, ragged blossoms sent out a faint, spicy breath and stirred in the evening breeze, as if some lovely lady, long since dead, walked there again and rustled her perfumed silks in the twilight that gloomed beneath the tall evergreens.

The terrace below the house was in some sort of order. The grass had been lately mown, and the rusty, broken fountain was running, its iron Triton spouting water from a slimy conch. Beyond, a peacock strutted by a gorgeous bed of phlox, shaking out his jeweled plumes and giving out his strident cry. The leaves rustled overhead as if whispering to the

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child of those who had dwelt there long ago, of the home joys and sorrows, of the comedies and tragedies of the deserted house.

The cry of the peacock roused a lady who was sitting upon a bench, and who had been musingly contemplating the darkening river and the distant town, where lights were beginning to twinkle. Virginia stood unobserved behind an acanthus bush, gazing awe-struck at her—the kind of creature she had never seen before, nor known outside of books.

A poor-farm inmate, who in his able days had been a book-agent, had brought his worn samples with him to the farm when stricken by age and palsy. At his death, Peter had relegated them to the garret, and from that time the garret became a Mecca to one earnest little pilgrim who journeyed thither to worship at the shrine of literature. Her chores done, Virginia would disappear up the narrow box stair, and, seated upon a pile of old carpet, be straightway translated to that place whose light never shone on land or sea. Dickens, Scott, Hawthorne, Longfellow and Shakespeare were the priests of her temple, and she knew well their stately homilies.

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In *their* world, she had seen ladies like this one—tall and slender, in dark gown with lace at neck and wrist, and abundant gray hair piled high above a haughty white face—whose deep eyes now gazed at her in a horrified stare.

"Please, Ma'am," began Virginia—"please, Ma'am, I've lost my way."

And then a strange thing happened, for the lady thrust out repelling hands as though warding off some dreadful sight, while a sharp cry broke from her:

"My God! Delbert—Delbert Putnam!"

Springing up, she fled from the place, leaving Virginia staring after her affrightedly.

CHAPTER VI

Virginia stood alone in the garden, her heart beating hard, for what seemed a long time; but, in reality, it was only a moment or two until she heard a bell tinkle within the house and a voice call, "Madam Putnam, O Madam Putnam!" And presently a middle-aged negro woman in white cap and apron came down the walk exclaiming, "Who's there? Who is it?" And Virginia cried out gladly, "It's me, Charlotte, Virginia." For this was Aunt Silvy's daughter, who visited the poor-farm occasionally.

"Why, land o' Goshen, honey! If it ain't Virgie of the pore-farm! However did you git way up here, chile?"

Virginia's story told, Charlotte was equal to the occasion.

"That's all right; don't you fret. Uncle Joe's just come in with the buggy an' ain't put up yit; so I'll git him to take you home by Mis' Sans'. An' that ole critter is alive an'

kickin' yit? She sho' must be mos' a hundred! An' as mean to a nigger as the 'Gyptians was to the Children of Israel." And Charlotte laughed a jolly, comfortable laugh as she chatted on, leading the way to the house.

"You come in the kitchen, honey, an' git a bite while Uncle Joe waters the mar', an' then we'll sen' you right along."

They stopped on their way while Charlotte called over the barnyard fence to Uncle Joe, and then went into a cozy lamp-lit kitchen, where the range was purring like a large pussy-cat, and a big black woman with bandanna-wrapped head and blue-checked apron was bustling about.

"Aunt Viney, this here little gal's from the pore farm, where Mammy works. I reckon we'd better feed her and send her home when yo' ole man comes in."

Aunt Viney nodded, but made no other reply, being engaged in serving up the most wonderful supper Virginia had ever seen.

Broiled chicken in a bed of green. A puffy, fragrant Sallylun, with powdered sugar on her brown cheeks. A cut-glass dish of large strawberries, and a glittering pitcher of yellow

cream. Delicate white cake, and a silver coffee-pot sending forth such an aroma as Virginia, in her experience of Rio coffee, had never known.

As Charlotte, with quiet swiftness, took up the tray and went through a swinging door, the poor-farm girl's quick eye noted that the lady she had frightened in the garden sat in a room beyond, with her face in her hands and her elbows on a little white-covered table. The table was spread with glass and silver, and tall candles gleamed from silver candelabra in its center and from sconces set at each side of a great mirror above a marble mantelpiece beneath which, although it was June, a fire burned.

When Charlotte had disappeared, Virginia was given a plate of good things at a side table, and by the time she had finished, Uncle Joe, a weazened old darkey, came shambling in. Thanking her entertainers, she climbed into the buggy, and they set off so briskly in the starlight that she had finished her errand and was on the farm porch before the nine o'clock bell summoned the inmates to bed.

Peter was not back, and Mrs. White, who

sat listlessly with Minnie Todd and a child or two, accepted her apology absently, being curious about the girl's conductor, as colored folks were few in Sedge County and she did not recognize the old man.

"Don't talk like these western darkeys; must be a southdown, I expect. Speak up, Virg; don't be so dumb. Where did he pick you up?"

Virginia told of the river-house visit with reticence, mentioning supping in the kitchen, and telling how Silvy's Charlotte was there and had sent the cook's husband to drive her home. Virginia had an idea that the lady up there in the woods would not like to be discussed at the poor-house. As she went to bed, she heard Mrs. White out on the back porch talking to Silvy, who always had a vesper pipe before going to bed.

"Why didn't you tell me old Mis' Putnam had come back from the South, Silvy?" she asked querulously. "I never do get no news way out here. And Peter is as clostmouthed as a fish."

"Why, Mis' White, dat gal of mine jest stepped in last week; so I ain't knowed the

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folks was back myself tell Sat'day. Ole Mis' come back bag and baggage to live up at Riverhouse, an' brought Joe and Viney. High-come low! Me and Viney uster pick cotton together sixty years ago. She an' Joe ain't never been offen the estate in Virginy afore."

"Guess Mis' Putnam got tired of it and has come back out West to live like folks. What she ever left Kansas for beats my guess." Melindy spoke scornfully. She was from Indiana and, as she said, "had no patience with southdowns, anyhow."

"Yessum," grunted Aunt Silvy, with a long draw at her pipe. She never had much to say to this queer mistress of hers, though she had lived at the poor farm since Madam Putnam had gone "back home," as she called the Putnam estate in Virginia where she had been born, and whence she had followed Cordelia Putnam as a bride to the West. The overseer's wife paid her well, but Aunt Silvy called her "Po' white trash" to herself, and looked down on her with the scorn of a colored servant born in a family of "de quality."

"Why in Sam Hill don't she live in Delmas

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at the hotel? She's got plenty of money since they found coal on that place back there. The St. Louie papers had a full page all about it one Sunday last winter. She'll catch her death o' dampness up there in the woods in that rat-ridden hole. Why, it ain't been lived in for twenty year."

"It's fifteen year since her an' Marse Del went back home an' he died," said the negress sadly. Sighing, she knocked the ashes from her pipe and rose. She wasn't going to be "pumped" about Mis' Cordelia by this Overseer woman.

Melindy was persistent. "What took 'em South so sudden that fall?"

Aunt Silvy had gone indoors, and Virginia did not hear the reply; and just then a bat, flapping across the landing, put out her candle, and she groped her way to bed in the dark, to dream of the shadowy house in the woods and the woman in black fleeing down twilight vistas crying, "My God, Delbert Putnam!"

CHAPTER VII

Mrs. White determined to give Virginia the book agent's box of books, and the day she left they went up into the poor-farm attic to get them. After some rummaging they were about to go down again when Mrs. White pulled from under the eaves a ragged carpet-bag.

"Well, suz! This here was your ma's, Virg," she exclaimed. "She fetched it here with her, and though Peter told me to burn it, I dassent, 'cause I knew if I'd a died, I'd a wanted the pore little baby I left behind to have my things; and I certainly would have hanted anybody that done away with them." And Melindy glanced into the dusky corners apprehensively.

A faint whisper seemed to sound through the attic, and something stirred and rustled the faded garments against the wall. But it was only the summer wind that had murmured

through the chinked walls, urging them to come away from that dusky, dusty place into the leaf flecked sunshine where Miss Louisy sat waiting in her comfortable old phaeton.

On the porch they found the inmates gathered to see the last of Virginia, some of the paupers even braving Peter's displeasure by coming in from the field. Minnie Todd sobbed at the carpet-room window, where she leaned as if she could see the last of her nursling. Uncle Johnny put a rectangular package in Virginia's hand, which she afterward found to be his curling-irons; and Bijah Bales gave her a worked handkerchief he had brought years ago from China when mate on the barge *Susan Jane*.

Miry Mimms came out last of all, when they were ready to start, to present a card with a highly colored hand thereon, whose ring-decked fingers held a bouquet and the motto, "Friendship's offering." This was the feeble-minded girl's choicest treasure. They all waved and chorused "Good-bye" as long as the phaeton was in sight.

Miss Louisy's house stood almost at the end of Main Street, where the distance between lots widened into gardens and pastures. It

was square and brown and high-ceilinged, with its wide door opening into a hall where, whenever the weather afforded the least excuse, Miss Louisy kept a fire in the old stone fireplace, for, having all her life been stinted of warmth, she now maintained a fire, together with such luxuries as the brown mare, the beaded cape, and other appurtenances of her altered fortunes.

The green parlor was on one side of the hall, in the faded glories of a striped paper, with steel engravings and horsehair furniture. Back of it was the dining-room with its walnut sideboard, which had heavy gilt-lined shelving rising above its brown marble top,—a piece of furniture Miss Louisy considered more gorgeous than the golden bed of King Solomon.

The best room across the hall was alight the night Virginia arrived, for the upper chambers were undergoing repairs, and, supper over, she and Miss Louisy sat there unpacking. The best room was very gay. Over its faded pink wall walked ladies purple, scarlet and salmon clad, all gold-outlined, in purple mantillas and bulging hoops. Here was a four-poster with gay tester and valance of cretonne, matching

the window curtains. There was also an ingrain carpet, and a pink china toilet set on the walnut washstand that hadn't its equal in Sedgebury.

The June moon peered in roundly on the two, and the breeze brought the odor of pinks and roses from the shell-bordered flowerbeds in the garden, where the beehives stood in a brown row by the fence, and the tansy was already knee-high beyond the plum trees.

The first thing Virginia brought into the light of Miss Louisy's bright little lamp was the carpet-sack.

"Land, child, wherever did you find that? That's your ma's carpet-sack. She kept it by her when she was dying and seemed to set store by it. When Peter White rummaged through it, after she had passed away, he said there warn't nothing in it but a few clothes and little sewing tricks not worth saving. But your ma looked at me so pitiful onct as she was layin' there and sort of nodded toward it, whispering, 'For Baby.'"

Virginia caught her breath with a sob. "Oh, Miss Louisy, were you there? Do tell me about my poor mamma. Nobody never would out there. Only once Mr. White called me a

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ugly name, and when I asked Mrs. White what it meant, she said I was my mamma's shame and disgrace, and she was mine."

Sobbing, she laid her head in Miss Louisy's lap and wept out the silent sorrow of years.

When she was quieter, Miss Louisy smoothed her disordered hair, saying:

"Not to-night; it's too late; but some time soon I'll tell you all I know. And don't you feel troubled about your Ma, Virginia. We're all just the Good Shepherd's poor stray lambs until he finds us and brings us home to the fold. There's something I read in a book once that I've never forgot—

" 'For the love of God is broader
Than the measures of man's mind,
And the heart of the Eternal,
Is most wonderfully kind.' "

Think of that whenever you think of your mother, honey."

Virginia's head was lifted, her face rapt. This was a different idea of God from that shouted from Sedgebury pulpits, where she had heard vengeful Jehovah represented as "drop-

ping the sinner into the fires of hell, as a housewife sweeps a fly into the coals."

Soothed and comforted, she at last lay down by Miss Louisy in the rose-scented feather-bed, and, nestling beneath the patchwork quilt, gazed at the moon and night, with the fireflies spangling the dusky green of the garden, until she could not tell where the spangled earth ended and the spangled sky began; slipping away peacefully to sleep, happy because her old prayer was answered, and she, at last, had a name and belonged to somebody.

CHAPTER VIII

Peter White's tendency to meddle made him trouble, for it caused a falling out with Jezreel Sands. Sands blamed the overseer for certain misfortunes which had come to him, and the two quarreled fiercely one November afternoon across the poor-farm fence.

"We ain't evened up yit, Son, me and you ain't. I allers pays my debts, good or bad an' so long as it was owin' to your tarnal advice that I lost a good share of money, I ain't a-goin' to keep my mouth shut no longer. Long's me and you was friendly, I wasn't for sayin' any-thing 'bout things that didn't concern me. Now my pocket's touched good and hard, things is different. I'll show you, Pete White, that I know how to *get even* all right, all right!"

Peter interrupted his tirade.

"What *are* you aimin' at, Jez? I vum, you act like you was teched in the head. I don't mind you bein' hot and callin' names, 'cause I

did egg you to invest that money where you lost it." (Peter, like most hypocrites, was a coward, and could stand much abuse.) "But I swan, if I know what's eatin' ye! Spit 'er out!"

Jezreel smiled sardonically. "Oh, I'll spit 'er out all right. What's in them blue envelopes that's come regular to you every month for years? 'Tain't a money order, I reckon?"

Peter turned livid; his hands clenched, and he looked about apprehensively. No one was in sight but Bijah Bales drawing water at a distant well and just turning barnward. Recovering somewhat, the Overseer answered by an implied threat,—“So you've been tamperin' with the United States mails? A penenchery offense, Neighbor.”

“Do you think I'm a nacherel fool? You can't prove anything, and dassent, anyway. I know who sends them money orders, too. When one of them got put in my mail box, I took it home. I'm observener than some, Peter, and havin' seed that same heavy blue envelope addressed in a woman's handwrite for a year or more, and you always a actin' like you was afeard somebody would notice it, I

nacherly was curious 'nough about it to take a look. It ain't no job to lay a envelope against the teakettle spout for a minit, and on the one I opened was writ, in a hand I recognized, having got checks from it off and on for twenty years for wood and garden sass, 'For the Girl.'"

Peter sprang silently as a catamount, and seized the old man's throat with both hands. His yellow teeth gleamed beneath drawn-back lips, and his little eyes were mere points of light under his half-shut lids. Jezreel staggered, but for all his sixty-odd years, the overseer was no match for him. With an unmoved countenance, he grasped the other's arms in his sinewy hands, and with a gulp and a groan, Peter swayed against the fence, with a bruised and sprained arm. Seeing him about to fall, Jezreel seized and shook him.

"Why, you onery wild cat, don't you ever think a snip like you is goin' to phase your uncle Jez! You listen to me now, without tryin' to murder me, and I'll talk some sense into your thick head. I've got to get some money this day week. So now, Boy," he continued soothingly, "my mad's all off now. It's

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plum foolish for two old cronies to row. I hope I ain't hurt you bad, Peter; I've got a terribul grip on me."

For some moments, Peter was incapable of speech. He leaned against the rail fence, white and snarling, his bloodshot eyes boding evil.

"Now see here," Jez went on. "Me and old Squire Brazzle have drunk together pretty often over to Earn's, and he let out 'nough for me—when I put your money orders with his tale—to make them monthly payments seem reasonable. It's worth twenty a month to save a hundred thousand dollars. Aha! I see by your face that you don't know all that coal land was the boy's, and the old woman ain't no right to a cent if he had a child a-livin'. I know lots, ye see, Peter. Who sends the money? Why? And *what gal don't get it?*"

Peter moistened his dry lips; he stood there like some grotesque statue, his dingy flannel shirt and his seamed face all of a color with the grey, lichened fence.

Sands pulled out a greasy black memorandum book and a pencil stub.

"Let's see. Twelve twenties is two hundred

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and forty, four nothin's is nothin', four fours is sixteen," he ciphered.

"Why, you old thief, \$8860.00 countin' interest. Gosh to hemlock! Why, it's nearly seventeen a month at six per cent! That's a good little pension, ain't it, pard? Well, by next week, my kind friend, I want about a thousand of that, and then you might run over to the house in the woods in a month or so and get me \$500.00 more. The old woman'll come down all right. She's a proud un; I know her. Ust to haul her wood in the old days when her Del was takin' them long rides out toward Delmas. If old Seth Byrd hadn't been such a Union man and hadn't hated Rebels so that he turned out his son's gal for lovin' one, Peter, me and you wouldn't have ever been enjoyin' his great gran'child's money. You'll get me my share next week, won't you, Pete?"

Peter spoke now for the first time. "I'll see you below first."

The other laughed roughly. "Oh, you'll do that all right in time, if the parsons are right. There's many a close deal me and you have pulled off, Peter, and you ain't done me right

about this last one. I'd a let you in on it if it had a-been me."

Peter snarled.

"You'd a let me in?"

"Well, you'll have to, anyway," continued his tormentor. "I'm just in the humor, after the fix you got me in and the chokin' you've give me to-day, to see you go up to Delmas and reside with Marshal Simms in the county jail a while. Tell Madam the gal's got to have an autymovele or somethin'. What's been your game? What've you been tellin' that stuck-up old puss all these years?"

"She thinks the girl's a-schoolin' at Delmas," Peter admitted, grudgingly.

Jezreel winked. "Well, it's time that young lady's went to St. Louie to boardin' school. It'll take about \$500.00 for that, eh? Now, Peter, 'cause me and you's old cronies, I'll not be hard on you. No doubt the young Miss's money ain't in ready cash?"

Peter nodded.

"As I said, I won't be hard on you, Neighbor. You give me a note dated a year from now, at 10 per cent., with good backin', for a

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thousand dollars. I can negotiate that all right without discount. Then you get \$500.00 out of Mis' P. and divy with me."

Peter licked his dry lips and forced his features into a semblance of a smile.

"Well, Jez, you've got me clost and you're holdin' me hard; but so long as you have kept still, and will be *obliged* to if you and me go into cahouts, I'll *do it*."

There was a set look on his face. He had come to a decision, and the overseer never changed his mind.

"I'll go now and have this arm looked to, and we can fix up the note in town. Looks like you've smashed 'er."

"You keep your hands offen me if you don't want to get hurt," Jezreel growled. "I'm a-minded yet to have you up for 'sault and battery."

Peter, now fully master of himself, broke in propitiatingly: "Well, I don't bear ye no malice. A man's got a right to defend himself, and I was so plum mad for a minute at the notion of you findin' me out that I'd a strangled my grandmother without thinkin'."

Jezreel looked at him frowningly. "By

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Gosh! I reckon ye would. Come on and get in my buggy; it's hitched round to front. I'll drive ye in and let Doc Whitsett look at that flipper."

They had a quiet drive to town, and when the arm was bandaged and the note signed, they separated, Sands slouching into the Emporium, where he liked to loaf around the big bell-shaped stove, while Peter stole furtively up the stairs of Earn Seigel's "joint" for a drink, for he now and then went to the city for a spree, though careful of overstepping the bounds at home or damaging his reputation as a temperate citizen. He sat late over his whiskey, and Jezreel Sands must have lingered in town, too, for his supper cooled on the table and Hazel-poni went grumbling to bed without him. The next morning he was found beside the road unconscious, with a pistol wound in the head, and further on his horse and buggy were discovered tied to a tree.

Although hurt badly, Jezreel did not die; but when the bullet was extracted and he had regained consciousness, he could neither speak nor move, and as the weeks passed, only his fierce eyes and an occasional grunt showed that he was still alive.

CHAPTER IX

On Christmas morning the sun rose red and glorious over a white snow-crust. The old Jarred house was garnished with bitter-sweet and evergreens. Sausage and buckwheat cakes smoked on Miss Louisy's little round table, where a geranium, in a scarlet paper petticoat, made a bright centerpiece. At each place lay a neat pile of white packages, and it seemed to Miss Louisy that she could never wait until breakfast was over to open them. In the back yard, Sam was chopping wood and singing cheerily, "Ole Chriskrinkel, he done come round," happy over his warm comforter and the fifty-cent piece he had found, with an orange and a box of candy, on the kitchen table.

The breakfast bell had rung once, twice, and yet Virginia did not come down until Miss Louisy had called from the foot of the stairs. Yet this was not surprising, as the girl had been up late the night before at a party, and if Vir-

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ginia's "Merry Christmas" was hardly as joyous as one might expect, Miss Louisy was too absorbed in pouring coffee and serving buckwheats to notice; though she *was* surprised when Virginia said, "I wasn't asleep, Auntie; I've been up since five o'clock."

"For the landsakes!" Miss Louisy nearly dropped the coffee pot. "And all the presents waiting! You wasn't sick, dearie, was you?" anxiously; "Though after all the gallivanting and goin's-on, I shouldn't wonder a bit."

Virginia laughed.

"I'm not sick a bit, but just worrying about something. How can a person decide what they ought to do about telling on somebody, if they know it will make trouble?"

"I'd ask somebody older an' wiser than me about it."

"But I can't do that, either, as it would be telling."

Miss Louisy suppressed her curiosity with a generosity worthy a finer bred woman. Though she would not have so expressed it, she saw that here was a young soul struggling for ethical action. She set down her cup, and her face was very kindly as she said:

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"Well, childie, I'd pray over it and wait the Lord's promptin's. Love always meets our needs and prepares the table (the way) before us. Wait and pray, Virginia." Then they hurried through the meal and cleared away to make room for the Christmas presents.

It would take too long to enumerate all the things those delightful packages revealed. But Virginia had the blue-bound copy of "Paul and Virginia" that she had wanted for months, and Miss Alcott's "Old Fashioned Girl," for Sedgebury girls did not read many novels, and still considered the wholesome, cheerful tales of L. M. A. thoroughly charming and satisfying. The pretty little gold brooch with a pearl in it was from her school friend, Clara Elwell. Another had sent a box of handkerchiefs; and last, but largest and gayest of the gifts, was a rainbow petticoat of Germantown, crocheted by Miss Louisy, who, in turn, rejoiced over a purple-bound Thomas à Kempis, a bottle of lavender water, three pairs of stout stockings, and a small home-made book, bound in green linen and lettered rather shakily in gold, "Poems by Virginia Miller."

When kisses and thanks and explanations

about everything were exchanged, and Virginia had gone upstairs to set their bedrooms to rights, Miss Louisy sat before the Franklin stove, a pleasant sight to see, if there had been anybody to look but the inquisitive robin who peered saucily in at her from the window ledge. With her plum-colored second-best dress well turned up above her petticoat, she examined the little book of rhymes, pondering over her young poet's future, though a plump turkey, lying cold in the buttry, might have reminded her reproachfully that it was nearly ten o'clock, that her neighbor, Mrs. Tealy, together with Clara Elwell and her mother were coming to dinner at one, and that the vegetables were still in the north cellar.

Meanwhile, Virginia, upstairs, was behaving very queerly for a girl who had just received everything she wanted,—the first real Christmas gifts of her life, for, save for a sack of candy from the Church tree, these were indeed her first presents, as Christmas was not celebrated at the poor-farm.

Virginia lay on her little bed, which stood well pulled out from the wall, with covers tidily turned back, shivering beneath a corner of the

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comfort while the cold air from the open window swept her fluffy locks across her worried young face. Unheeding her chattering teeth, she brooded over her problem; for Virginia was in great perplexity, and this was how it had come about.

A week before Christmas, she had gone with some schoolmates to the poor-farm woods for Christmas decorations. She ran far in advance, searching for a draw where waxberries were plentiful and, climbing a fence into the lane leading to Jezreel Sands', went down until she came to a culvert. The ditch was full of sodden leaves. The afternoon sun shone brightly over the unploughed fields that lay gaunt and bare, with a few scattered trees flushing as if at the sun's warm backward glance. A snowbird flew up by the hedge, and a rabbit scampered away before her. Virginia sang as she ran along, and across the draw discovered the berries, ruby-red against their foliage. Running down the declivity and stumbling, she fell prone in the leaves, and as she fell, her clutching fingers closed about a small oblong object. Her find proved to be a pocket diary, across which was written the name

of her old enemy, Peter White. Its last entry, dated the day Jezreel Sands was hurt, read—

“Received \$20.00 from Mrs. P., as usual.”

With her waxberries in one hand and the book in the other, Virginia walked slowly along, wondering how it came there, a mile or two from the farm; till all at once she understood.

Jezreel was found insensible near the culvert. Peter White had last written in the book the evening Jezreel had driven from town, for before this item was another on the same date,—“Went to Todd’s sale this aft.” If Peter White lost his book after the sale was over, he must know who hurt Jezreel Sands. Then Peter must have—Virginia gave a cry and threw the book from her, but picking it up again, she hid it beneath her jacket and joined her companions, so pale and quiet that they declared she had seen a ghost up Sands’ land, and teased her all the rest of the afternoon to know what ailed her.

Now she held the book in her hand, miserably wondering what she should do with it, when everybody else in Sedgebury was happy, the

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church-bells all ringing, and Miss Louisy bustling cheerily about downstairs, getting a most wonderful Christmas dinner.

CHAPTER X

The day after Christmas was sullenly cold. The sun was shut from earth by a steel-gray curtain. Ponds were frozen deeply, and the trees creaked under an icy burden. The smoke curled up slowly from the chimneys, as if made torpid by the low temperature. Teamsters, few and far between, walked the roads to town beside their rough-coated horses, waving their arms and stamping their numb feet. The very pigs squealed from their pens that "this is a cold world, my masters!" and when Miss Louisy's Sam opened the chicken-house door, only a few of the oldest and toughest biddies ventured forth, and then went speedily back again to their comfortable straw, mindful of frost-nipped combs.

Miss Louisy called, "Sam, make a warm mash for Daisy and the mare, and bring in extra wood. It's about the coldest day we've had yet." She stood at the kitchen door, with a purple plaid shawl over her head and her nose

fast turning the same color, but she only stopped a moment with "Ugh, it's shivery!"

Re-entering the kitchen, where the kettle purred on the shining stove and her biscuits turned flaky and brown in the oven, Miss Louisy paused to warm her hands a little before pouring the boiling water into the coffee pot, where darkly brown and fragrant lay freshly ground coffee of a price that Sedgebury gossips dubbed ruinous, for it was steel-cut and cost forty cents a pound, and this was a saving community, where Sparbuckel's at twenty cents was thought good enough for even the Minister's dinner. But Miss Louisy always said, "I've done without often, but I'll never bile over no grounds nor drink Rio so long as I can fell a hem."

"Seven-thirty and Virginia still upstairs! That child is surely a-growing too fast. I don't like the way she's been looking lately. I reckon I must call her, though. Sody biscuit ain't never good when they set."

She went into the hall and opened the stair door, letting in a wave of cold air. "Sakes alive! The upstairs is like a ice-box. Next winter I'm going to put up some wood heaters,

though the hull town does say 'spendthrift.' Virginia Miller, be you comin' to your nice hot breakfast, or not?"

Receiving no answer to her hailings, the kind little woman climbed the steep stairs and opened Virginia's door. The shade was drawn and the room cold and dark, but from the little white bed came the sound of labored breathing. Thoroughly alarmed, she jerked up the shade, and turned to see her girl lying with parched lips and crimson cheeks, in a sleep that was almost a stupor. Miss Louisy cried out and put her hand to her heart. There swept over her the apprehension of Motherhood—a tender appreciation of those who, suffering through love, grow wise with the pain of life. But she wasted little time on emotions, and, hurrying downstairs, refilled the tea-kettle and dispatched Sam for Dr. Whitsett, even remembering, in her hurry, to set back the coffee pot and take the biscuit from the oven. Before Sam and the Doctor were there, she had lighted a roaring fire in the best room and hung curtains over the muslin window draperies to keep out drafts.

They brought Virginia downstairs and laid

her in the best best-room bed. She was half roused, but seemed dull and confused and complained of pains in her head and chest, exhibiting symptoms which Dr. Whitsett declared to be those of pneumonia.

When he had gone, with Sam following to bring back the medicine, the kitchen clock struck eleven, and Miss Louisy, conscious of a weakness in her knees and a faintness, realized suddenly that she had had no breakfast. So she sat down to it in the kitchen, and ate sadly and reflectively, pondering over the situation.

Help she must have, but this was a hard problem to solve. Hazel-el-poni Sands was tied at home with Jezreel, their neighbor, Mrs. Tealy, had gone to Delmas for Christmas Day and the remainder of the holidays. The baker's wife had a four-weeks-old baby. And so the list ran, through all the usual neighborly standbys in trouble.

There were no servants in Sedgebury. It is true a few families had "help"; but they were neighbor girls who worked for them as a favor and ate with the family. There were not many negroes in town besides Sam, and they were all engaged,—Sam's wife as cook at the Hotel,

and big black Judy had six family washings; and there the tale was told. Miss Louisy put down her coffee cup and sat staring forlornly at the dishes. Then her usual faith asserted itself, and she straightened up.

"I'll manage somehow, the Lord helping; and He will; He always has. 'Before you call, I answer,' He says." And she set about clearing up. She had just put the dishes into the dishpan when, as if in answer to her thought, there came a rap at the door. Opening it, she found a middle-aged negro woman, with eyes swollen and voice trembling from cold and emotion. The woman spoke deferentially.

"Good mornin', mam. Is you-all Miss Miller?"

Too amazed to speak, Miss Louisy nodded.

"I passed Mister Doctor Whitsett on the road, mam, an' he told me to come right here to you. He's knowed me an' all my kin for years, an' said he'd recommen' me when he heard I'd lef' my place." She paused and swallowed hard, her dark face working. "I'se Charlotte Putnam an' I served Madam Putnam up in the woods. My Granny, Aunt Silvy, out to the pore-farm, used to belong to her fo' the war

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back in Virginy, an' I've been with the Madam an' served her faithful, mam, till las' night her an' me had some disagreements, an' fust thing this mornin', I took my foot in my han' an' walked to town."

Here she paused, out of breath, in quite a state between the cold and crying.

Miss Louisy had drawn her in and closed the door by this time, and was looking at her pityingly.

"You poor critter, you are half froze! That's a awful walk a day like this. Set down and unwrap, and I'll het up the coffee pot."

Charlotte sat smiling gratefully as her stiffened fingers fumbled with her fascinator and buttons, and by the time the coffee was hot and she had forestalled her hostess and waited on herself, she had quite recovered her composure and her normal temperature.

Miss Louisy's interrogation as to the nature of the disagreement with her late mistress elicited the information that "Somebody's been botherin' Madam for money all the time, an' lately she's been pow'ful hard to get along with." Then Charlotte related how she had picked up some letters which Madam had

dropped from a tin box that always stood locked on a stand by her bed. Then Madam had fallen into a terrific rage, called her a prying hussy, and said she would have her whipped for being in the plot to defraud her of her rights and blacken her dead son's name; and had gone on at such an awful rate, calling names and 'walking the floor like mad until, frightened and angry, the maid had fled to her room, and, packing her belongings for future transportation, had walked to Sedgbury.

"An' Mister Doctor Whitsett said Virginy was took down, an' sent me here. An' here I is, mam. You'll fin' me might handy; I can do most anything, from fine sewin' to cookin'. An' if you'll take me, I'll work for threë a week, though Madam Putnam paid me five. An' I'll help you good, 'cause I knows that child and likes her well, an' if you'll show me the pantry, mam, an' order luncheon, I'll get to work."

Thus, before Miss Louisy was aware how it all happened, she found herself sitting beside her patient, with Charlotte moving deftly about in the kitchen as if she had been there always and wasn't the first maid Miss Louisy had ever had in her life.

CHAPTER XI

Three weeks after Christmas, Miss Louisy sat in the twilight at Virginia's bedside gazing mournfully through the window upon the ice-bound garden. The coals in the Franklin heater sent a gleam, here and there, over the sad little woman, over the small table filled with medicines, sometimes straying to touch tenderly the drawn white face on the pillow, where the sick girl muttered confusedly of black books and the draw where the waxberries grew.

Dose as Dr. Whitsett might, and nurse as Miss Louisy and the faithful Charlotte did, it seemed that all their skill was vain. All day the weary head tossed; all night the purple eyelids arched over the staring eyes, and the fever-parched lips muttered and muttered. Now of the old days at the poor-farm. Now they called schoolmates to play, or babbled of the black-clad woman fleeing beneath the trees of the house in the woods; and then they cried out

to hide the book with blood on it, for Mrs. White's sake.

In the quiet of the sick-chamber, Miss Louisy had lately spent much time over her Bible, and a book that Mrs. Tealy had brought back from Delmas on her return from a fortnight's visit. The ten days at the county seat had done wonders for the latter and she declared that, by learning how to study her Bible, through the prayers of a Miss Duncan, she had been cured of rheumatism that had closed the fingers of one hand, and to prove this exhibited five supple digits to her astonished friend, with only the enlarged joints to show a trace of the crippling disease.

Mrs. Tealy declared that Virginia could be healed as she had been, without medicine, by the understanding that God was all power and that in His love there was no room for disease, as He was everywhere. She had eagerly explained all this as she lingered in the hall, rehearsing her tidings of joy in hushed tones, for fear of disturbing the patient, and declaring that, as she had heard many acquaintances relate wonderful things of the healings compassed by the new "do" religion, she had bought a little Bible

commentary for Miss Louisy when some one had written her that Virginia could hardly get well.

This was all very new and strange to the little ex-seamstress. It meant a complete upheaval of all the ideals of a life spent under the iron-clad rule of orthodoxy. Yet to the trusting heart of her it was not so foreign, after all; for Louisy, in living her simple, good life, often wondered if there wasn't something wrong with a religion that failed to demonstrate the teachings of its founder, and which loudly cried the letter of the law without recognizing its spirit, maintaining its faith without its works, and totally barren of "the signs following."

All the afternoon Louisy sat thus, with the commentary in her hand, rising now and then to administer Virginia's medicine or to talk a little at the door with some neighbor who proffered aid and sympathy,

Suddenly she was roused from her reverie. A feeble hand touched her arm, and Virginia murmured distressedly, "Oh, Auntie, hide that note-book, please."

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She settled the girl more comfortably, murmuring, "Well, well, dearie, of course I will. Where did you put it?" she added without any thought of an answer, being used to the vagaries of fever. But she was surprised by Virginia's collected reply.

"Under my mattress. It's a secret. Don't let anybody get it."

Only half believing in the book's existence, Miss Louisy ran upstairs and, sure enough, under the edge of Virginia's mattress was a small black note-book. Hurrying back with it, smiling at what she believed some school-girl mystery, she found Virginia unconscious—so white and sunken of eye that she tossed the book toward the table without noticing that it fell into the open stove, flaring up and vanishing ere she had rung the bell for Charlotte.

After a short consultation, the woman hurried out to send for the doctor, and Miss Louisy sat waiting in the gathering darkness, with tear-wet cheeks.

It had been a mild day for January, and the sun-set was clear, leaving a streak of red to fire the west and gleam over the garden. From

a bare branch near the window, a sparrow twittered his vesper song—a small silhouette against the crimson sky.

“How can I be so fearful,” Miss Louisy murmured, “when in the old hard days Love never failed me? Not a sparrow falleth without care, and my child’s life is worth many such little critters. Oh, why can’t I rest secure that her life is held up by the Everlasting Arms, when that little bird sits there cold and hungry a-singing praises, and lets God take care?” Resolutely drying her eyes, she went into the dining-room and forced herself to eat some of the supper Charlotte had made for her.

It was well for Miss Louisy that she had thus stood for a moment on the plains of peace, for she presently walked into a very dark valley. Virginia’s fever increased, and when, by eight o’clock, Dr. Whitsett came in, cold and muddy from his country rounds, he walked to the window without comment and stood silently tugging at his beard. As a young physician, he had seen Virginia’s mother’s life-thread snapped by the “remorseless hand,” and now again death seemed to smile jeeringly at the

ineffectualness of science. A lamp burned dimly on the table where Miss Louisy sat, her hands clenched on the red cover, her strained gaze following him despairingly. Charlotte watched from her corner, her dark face immobile above her neckerchief, like an ebon statue, save for an occasional flash of eye-white as she glanced from Dr. Whitsett to where her mistress crouched.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity of waiting, he came to Miss Louisy's chair and laid his hand upon her shoulder. Charlotte gasped at sight of his compassionate face, and raised her apron to her eyes. Louisy had ministered with Stephen Whitsett at many a bedside, and they had won some battles with the last enemy, but as she looked up now, she realized before he could speak that here they had lost. His voice sounded far away, and she had a curious feeling as if he had said all this before, with the same trouble in his strong tone.

"We have done all we can, old friend; for the last two days I haven't been able to help her. That's why I had Johnson over from Delmas yesterday, and he predicted certain conditions and confirmed my opinion that, should they

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obtain, we could do nothing more. This coma will be followed by a total collapse, and by morning, Louisy, she will be gone."

Miss Louisy rose and stood staring at him, grief-stricken and inarticulate.

"Good-night. I must get home for a bite, and then out on another case. I'll be in again before twelve; but we can do nothing, nothing! Shall I send somebody to you—Mother or Mrs. Elwell? There are several neighbors in the parlor."

He tried to speak calmly and naturally, but his words shocked him, they seemed so cold—so inadequate in this hour of need. Miss Louisy shook her head.

"No, no," she whispered. "Don't send anybody for a while. Charlotte will be enough. Nobody could do anything now."

Dr. Whitsett grasped her hand. "Good-bye, then, until later. Discontinue the medicine, Charlotte. We can only bow to God's will."

As he hurried noiselessly away, the watchful Charlotte saw Miss Louisy's face turn grey and her lips set, and hurrying across the room, reached her just in time to lower her into a chair ere she sank fainting across its arm.

CHAPTER XII

Charlotte, remembering Miss Louisy's last injunction that she wanted nobody, and fearing to disturb Virginia, brought the former back to consciousness without summoning aid; and, indeed, she was soon quite herself again, and sat sipping a glass of water, though she held it to her lips with an unsteady hand.

When she at last spoke, Charlotte thought she was out of her mind with sorrow; but her voice was steady, though her face was white.

"Charlotte, take your apron and gather the bottles off that stand by the bed and throw them away. Don't say nothing about what the doctor said, and you can stay in the kitchen and eat your supper, my good girl. It's noon since you've had a bite."

Hardly knowing whether or not to obey her, Charlotte lingered over her task of collecting the medicines.

"When St. Paul was in the shipwreck, the mariners threw overboard everything, Charlotte. Yes, take even that brandy bottle out.

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The captain has deserted the ship, and all that man can do has failed; and me and my girl's a-going to turn to the real source of help—God.”

Awed and shaken, Charlotte crept away. The fire ticked lazily now and then, and there was no other sound in the quiet chamber. Miss Louisy turned up the lamp and put on her spectacles.

“‘Resigned to God’s will,’” she muttered. “I don’t believe that it *is* His will that my girl should leave this earth just as her young life is budding into so much promise.” Her eyes were bright in her pale face. All human invention had failed, yet there was within this sturdy little woman that which defied even death. “Nobody can help us now but God, and this book here says He will.” And her hand closed over the little Christian text-book as the hand of a soldier closes over his sword when he takes his last stand against the enemy, with his back to the wall.

“Oh, I always did say we ought to have a *do* instead of a *say* religion, and I reckon this book can’t be far wrong if it shows us how to obey the Master’s command to cure the sick.”

She scarcely noticed the sick girl now. Like a warrior on the battlefield, she was cuirassed against friend and foe; and a feeling of exultation swept over her as she dropped on her knees and poured out a prayer for help and understanding. Rising, she took up her Bible and opened it to the glorious promises of the Ninety-first Psalm, poring over its reassurances again and again. In Lamentations she came upon this: "His compassions fail not. Great is His faithfulness. He doth not afflict willingly the children of men. The Lord is good unto them that wait for the Salvation of the Lord."

"If *He* don't willingly afflict us, nothing can *really* do it, for He is all the power there is, and the Bible says there ain't nothing made 'thout He made it. He never made a death law, and every law that body makes over man, who is spiritual, and not flesh-and-blood, is broke by God's law of Life. The preachers allers keep a-preaching that we live and move and have our being in Him, Who to know is life eternal. And that's all Scripture truth, too, 'cause I've read it time and time again myself. 'I shall not die, but live and declare the works of the

Lord. The Lord hath not given me over to death.' "

She sat up as she reasoned. She felt a growing calm, and a curious thought came to her *that some one else was in the room*. She glanced at Virginia's bed, half expecting to see a stately figure by the girl's side and hear the "Talitha cumi" of Truth's perfect Ideal ring out again. The house was still, save when a coal sputtered or 'she could catch the quick, slight breathing of the little figure on the bed. The color had come back to Miss Louisy's cheeks. Her lips were firm set and her eyes hopeful.

"My child's life is in His hands, and neither shall any pluck it out of His hand. The Master said that what He did we could do. Oh, my Master, look down on Thy ignorant servant and teach her that Life is Thine, and sickness and death are nothing but foolish lies that we scare ourselves with like children afraid of ghosts!

"Lord, I *do* believe, and know through this teaching that all that is real is God and the things *He* made, and *He* never made death, be-

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cause He is Eternal Life. Hallelujah!" 'prayed the little seamstress.

"My child's life is safe in Thee, and Death is swallowed up in victory."

At twelve o'clock, Dr. Whitsett returned sorrowfully to aid his old friend in the death-watch. He found Miss Louisy fast asleep, with a smile on her peaceful face. Hurrying to the bed, he looked down on Virginia, to find himself gazing into calm eyes; while a tremulous hand crept out to him, and its owner cried weakly, but with much of her old gayety,—

"How glad I am you've come, Doctor. I'm so comfy and rested. Aunt Louisy has been sleeping for ages, and I'm hungry enough to eat nails. And oh, Dr. Whitsett, *can't* I have some lemonade? I'm so thirsty."

CHAPTER XIII

The next day Virginia sat up for a while, but it took time to master the weakness of bed-ridden days, and much strength of mind on Miss Louisy's part to keep out curious visitors and meet the storm of protest that descended upon her head from the members of the church and its pastor when she declared her belief in practicing what they had been preaching for so many years.

In a short while, Virginia was back in school, braving the rigors of February without relapse, much to the surprise of Dr. Whitsett, whose whole theory of the treatment for pneumonia had been upset, though, as a conscientious physician, he had long since been forced to admit that the so-called science of materia medica had often to face the barrier of "thus far and no farther." Yet here, indeed, was something that crossed that barrier and triumphed over death, and Stephen Whitsett

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began to think it "a door to which he found no key."

Pretty Isabelle Duncan now came often from Delmas to sit and study with Miss Louisy and Virginia by the pot of primroses in the dining-room window. Mrs. Tealy and her daughter came, too, and sometimes Dr. Whitsett himself, though they noticed that this was usually when Miss Duncan's phaeton was hitched outside.

These little informal meetings worked wonders and armed the little band with a power that helped and healed whoever came under its influence, for they were one and all learning the great truth that sin, sickness and death are but ugly shadows that vanish before the light of God's love.

For a while Dr. Whitsett talked of auto-suggestion and hypnosis, but he continued to drop into Miss Louisy's whenever Miss Duncan came. Then he fell into a way of going to Delmas to the Wednesday night meeting. He also began to study his Bible, with occasional dips into Hudson's "Law of Psychic Phenomena" and Myers' "Human Personality." But he found nothing that answered

his insistent queries like the simple story of the Healer of Galilee, and, making exhaustive researches into the history of the Apostolic Church, found that for three hundred years after its founder's translation, it had practiced healing without medicines. After spending much time and money on books to convince himself of the facts stated in the new teaching, he began to understand that the testimony of the physical senses could be destroyed by another sense which the old Greeks sought after and named the "Gnosis," and the new Christianity humbly called "spiritual understanding." That the Christ, Whose "kingdom is an everlasting kingdom," is the Ruler under Whose reign "they neither hurt or destroy . . . for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord." And the physician was finally forced to reluctantly admit that this "knowledge of the Lord" was the understanding of man's spiritual entity, which healed all manner of disease.

Virginia convalesced quickly, and the memory of Peter's note-book and his connection with Jezreel's assault strangely vanished. Despite her weeks of absence from school, she

took her grammar diploma with honor, praised by her teacher and schoolmates, who had grown fonder of her since she had come back to them, as it were, from death's door, so much graver and sweeter.

"Virg's never cross nor stuck-up now," one girl remarked, "and I'd rather have the new way that's made her well and good than all the other religions in town." And this sentiment was re-echoed by more than one of Miss Louisy's neighbors.

CHAPTER XIV

We cannot always bask in sunshine or walk upon heights, and Louisy, taking her first timid steps in the New Way, suddenly found her feet stumbling and her hand groping for guidance through the dark clouds that lowered about her.

A serious danger threatened her little fortune. Without much knowledge of business, she could just make out from the formal letters of her agent that, for a time at least, her small income had stopped, and that the principal might also be engulfed.

During the two years that she and Virginia had lived together so happily, changes had come to Sedgebury. With the railroad and the new town hall, new business enterprises had sprung up. The Emporium had taken the store room next door for its dry goods and had added a dress-making department under a woman who had learned tailoring in St. Louis. This lessened any chance Miss Louisy had of

profitably resuming her old trade. Besides, the Sedgbury young ladies now found it convenient to take the morning train to Delmas and shop there, buying cheap "ready-mades," which she had to admit were "real stylish," even if they were badly tailored.

Her occupation gone, Louisy felt herself assailed by a dread never before experienced. She sold her horse and phaeton and dismissed Sam (Charlotte had long since gone back to her old Mistress in the house in the woods), and sat up late poring over her bank book while Virginia slept. There was but \$100.00 to her credit in the Sedgbury National Bank, and Louisy grieved most over disappointing Virginia, for she had planned for her girl two months in St. Louis that summer, with Clara Elwell.

Then like a thunder-clap out of the blue sky came a letter. A former school friend was dangerously ill on an Iowa farm. She had six small children, and her husband, half distracted, had written to Louisy as the only available person.

Together with her "do" religion, Miss Louisy had formulated one rule of conduct,

—that whatever was presented to her as a duty was part of God's plan for her, and so she telegraphed that night to the anxious husband the two words, "Will come."

From their vine-covered seat Miss Louisy and Virginia could see the river's silvery windings among the hills. The sultry air of the summer noon was scented by elder flowers. Bees droned in the wild roses sprawling over the garden fence, and beneath the drooping day-lilies, Virginia spied a little toad, with half-shut eyes, darting his tongue for midges. Out in the pasture, sheep huddled in the shade of the one great oak, looking strangely like the bits of ragged white clouds afloat in the blue sky. Below them, a hen scratched and clucked for her brood; white butterflies floated over the parched garden; while far in the blue above they saw a hovering hawk, with wings scarce fanning the hot air, all a-quiver, as if earth panted in the heat.

Virginia took the bad news well. She had grown more quiet and maidenly since she had awakened from what had been so nearly a dream of death, and though her disappointment at losing her visit to St. Louis was keen,

she did not mention it, but cheered and amused Louisy by formulating many impossible schemes. These rejected as impracticable, she made another suggestion.

"We'll find a way, dear. The Emporium would give me work. You know that my book-keeping marks were perfect, and I'm sure I could get a place as cash girl. Jim Spangler was saying yesterday that Janey Downs was going to the country, and his pa was worried to death for help."

Miss Louisy smiled into the rosy face leaning toward her, but shook her head. When young women went up to Delmas to work in the stores, she thought that they would be safer and happier doing housework; wondering, in her democracy, why they looked down on domestic service, home protection and comforts, and chose the glare and noise of a city store, with its poor weekly wage and its high rate of inferior living.

"No, no; that would never do! I shan't be gone a month, and I guess Mrs. Tealy and Amy would be glad to come and stay here."

Then she bit her lip, remembering that she could not afford to feed two extra persons for

even so short a time. When they had planned their summer, they had sold all the chickens but a few tough old biddies, and for the same reason, had planted less garden; and Miss Louisy, believing debt an invention of the evil one, always cheerfully did without what she could not pay for.

A copy of the Sedgebury *Clarion* lay on a table near Virginia, and as they talked, she took up the little inky sheet and used it as a fan. The *Clarion* had but lately emerged from weekly obscurity into the glare of a daily's existence, and it had not yet, as it were, washed its face by buying new type. So at times you did not know whether Cy Jenkins' frau or cow were dead, or whether Keziah Draper had married Larry Anderson or Harry Anderson. Virginia turning it over as their talk trailed on and fell into wells of silence, without a suggestion by which they could pull it out again, suddenly cried,—

“Why, Aunt Louisa, here it is, just what we need! A place for me to stay while you are away, and a chance to make some money. Listen. ‘Wanted.—A well conducted, intelligent young girl as companion for lady in the

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country. No menial services required. Person must be well recommended and possess an agreeable reading voice.' ”

In the cool of that afternoon, when the new red watering cart had laid the dust on Main Street, Miss Louisy and Virginia went down town, for the advertisement had referred to Lawyer Elwell's office.

The merchants chatting at shop doors were only vendors of hardware, boots, saddlery, or other uninteresting commodities; for all those establishments catering to the feminine—milliners, dry-goods, confectioneries and drug-stores—were filled with bright summer gowns, as the society of Sedgebury shopped, gossiped or had refreshments, enjoying their afternoon down town as city women do a reception.

Virginia walked along sedately by Miss Louisy, so pretty a sight in her white lawn dress and hat with its green feather that more than one youth smiled and turned to gaze after the slender little figure.

CHAPTER XV

Lawyer Elwell sat in his office, somewhat tired after the long, hot day. Miss Louisy briefly explained her business, going somewhat into the need which had arisen for curtailing expenses and stating that at the same time a journey was imminent. The opportuneness of this possibility of Virginia's finding a home, and also of adding to their income, seemed to her providential, she added.

"It is Mrs. Putnam, in the house in the woods near the poor-farm, who wants a girl." Mr. Elwell put in, "By George, now I think of it, Miss Louisy, her maid, Charlotte, helped nurse Virginia when she so nearly slipped away from us." He laid his hand affectionately on the girl's shoulder.

Virginia flushed and smiled.

"From what Charlotte told me of her mistress, I'm afraid the place wouldn't be an easy one for Virginia," Miss Louisy suggested dubiously.

"Oh, not so hard, either. Mrs. Putnam gets

lonely up there, and as she dislikes travelling and has never made friends in the West she needs companionship. So she commissioned me to find some nice quiet young person, who wouldn't be slamming doors and hallooing all over the place" (looking quizzically at Virginia). "She especially mentioned that she wanted some one not easily frightened."

Virginia murmured meditatively, "How strange! I always thought the house looked as if it was haunted." Then she explained.

"Excuse me, Mr. Elwell, I didn't mean to interrupt; but I got lost once and found Mrs. Putnam sitting in her garden at dusk. It was all like a story by Dickens. And she cried out a name and ran away from me as if I was a ghost."

Mr. Elwell looked interested. "What did she say? Do you remember?"

"Oh, she said 'Delbert Putnam' over and over, and when I saw her again (Charlotte had taken me in the kitchen, and it was through the pantry door), she had her face in her hands and seemed to be crying."

Miss Louisy was surprised, never before having heard of this adventure.

"Well, I'm afraid it won't do for you, dearie," she suggested.

"Well, *I* do think it would," said the lawyer decisively. He was used to making up people's minds for them. "She would pay \$10.00 and all Virginia would have to do would be to read to her, care for the bird, and take the dog for a run. There's a fine library in Riverhouse. Aha! I thought that would catch our little book-worm!"

Virginia glowed. "Oh, is the house really named 'Riverhouse'? Just like a book house, and lots of things to read. That would be grand! Oh, do say yes, Auntie. Think of all the books I want to read!"

Miss Louisy pondered. The money was to be considered; it would buy Virginia winter dresses. And after all, what had she heard to Mrs. Putnam's discredit? The gossip of a servant who, having displeased her mistress, had been scolded. She reproached herself for unfair prejudice. Still, she said tentatively, "Why does she want somebody that ain't afraid?"

Mr. Elwell smiled. "Well, it's a lonely old place far off the road, as you have seen, Vir-

ginia; and the superstitious darkies are afraid of it, and even Virginia says it looks haunted. If things are so she can't go to St. Louis, and you must leave, why, it's the very thing."

Virginia squeezed Miss Louisy's hand persuasively. As she stood by her foster-mother, Mr. Elwell watched her with a musing frown. Where had he seen before just such an earnest upward look? Where had he seen such deeply curved brows with their arch almost meeting? As he gazed, the girl's face grew strangely familiar. Old memories came back with smiling faces,—scenes of college life. He heard the voices of mates long dead. Then he suddenly recovered himself with a start, conscious that Virginia was shrinking under his stare. He roused himself with an apology, and brushing his hand over his eyes, as if to dispel the mists of the past, he turned to Miss Louisy with the brisk inquiry,—

"Well, ma'am, what do you say?"

"Well, yes, she can go," said she, rising slowly, and Virginia tripped out of the office, delighted at the turn events had taken.

Lawyer Elwell sat long at his table. Then he sighed, went to a dusty shelf high up in a tier

piled with letter-boxes and old law reports. He drew down a small pasteboard box, untied its yellowed cord, and opening it revealed photographs of people dressed in the styles of twenty years before. From among them he drew a faded cabinet of a young man with wavy hair back-tossed from a high rounded brow. Deep-set eyes looked out earnestly at him, the heavy brows meeting across them. How like the face was to the fresh young one into which he had so recently gazed!

"By Jove," cried the lawyer, "where did that poor-house child get Delbert Putnam's face?"

CHAPTER XVI

Finding it impossible to compress her wardrobe into the Gladstone bag Mrs. Elwell lent her, as she had given Sam the poor-farm trunk and Miss Louisy needed her own, Virginia was forced to pack some of her belongings in the carpet-sack that had been her mother's. With her best hat in a handbox, this luggage was piled in Mr. Elwell's surrey one morning, with Miss Louisy beside it in front and Virginia and Clara Elwell behind.

It was but seven o'clock as they drove over the bridge, but the sun was already high, and its steady beams promised the travelers a warm journey. Below the bridge, the mill cast cool green shadows upon the water, as if to soothe its turbulence as it leaped the dam. On the mill-race wall, early fishermen sat mutely enjoying after-breakfast pipes while angling for their dinners.

The way lay through the sandy streets of

North Sedgebury, where the houses leaned over the eroded banks, as if they peeped upstream to see if their warden, the river, was threatening or pacific. Dew be-diamonded the grasses by the roadside, and each fence corner bore its decoration. Now tall elders holding lacey white parasols, now a cheerful group of sunflowers, a clump of flaming Indian-red, or the crushed strawberry tints of the milkweed. Nature seemed to have emptied her cornucopia of beauty over their way.

Out in the country, their road wound by fields where meadowlarks and bob-whites called through the billowed wheat, or green pastures, with sleek cattle cramming one more mouthful of the sweet pink clover into sides which already seemed on the verge of bursting. As brown Charley bowled them easily along, they sat silently enjoying the ride, until Virginia began to sing in her light, silvery voice:

"Green pastures are before me
Which yet I have not seen;
The brightest skies are o'er me
Where darkest clouds have been.
My joy I cannot measure,
My path of life is free.

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My Father hath my treasure,
And He will walk with me."

Miss Louisy's eyes dimmed. "O thou of little faith," she chided herself, "see now how all things *are* a-working for our good, and how our worries get ironed out smooth by Love's hand. How foolish of me to fret, when things seem to right themselves if we only trust and wait. What if that bit of money does go, and when I pass on, this child be left as I was. He can 'raise up a mighty salvation' for her, as He did in David's house. I do pray that as I grow in understanding, I'll get less distrustful, because Love is everywhere, so want *can't* be at all. And, Louisy Miller, you are an ungrateful old thing to worry, when we are told to 'cast all our care on Him'; and I'm a-going to from now on, no matter what comes." And shaking her head resolutely, she gave the lines such a flap that Charley made a bound and increased his amble into a hearty trot, looking back reproachfully now and then in a surprised way that was truly comical.

It was afternoon when they reached the grassy lane down which Virginia had wandered

in that other summer which now seemed so long ago. Some attempt had been made to lop a few of the straggling branches and grub out the obstructing bushes; but they had to pick their way slowly. Coming to the gateway at last, Virginia found its griffins glowering as defiantly as of old, the tree-crowded lawn still dim and sweet, and the house as darkly-shuttered and silence-haunted as it had stood on that evening when she had approached it in Charlotte's wake. The griffins at the steps lay bathed in a stream of golden light which somehow had fought its way in through the tangled foliage, and above them, in the dark embrasure of the open door, stood Mrs. Putnam, erect and black-gowned. The sunlight illumined her dark figure and handsome dress, with its soft lace; lit to white heat the great diamond blazing at her throat and made her be-ringed fingers seem set in bands of fire, though it did not reach to her somber face, seeming to stop short as if repelled by its stern gloom, now somewhat mitigated by a slight curve of the lips, which Virginia learned afterward to call a smile.

Uncle Joe appeared around the house, and, bowing obsequiously to a silently waved hand,

assisted them to alight and led the horse up the grassy drive. It was not until they reached the place where the mistress stood on the broad stone platform topping the steps that she spoke. Then she welcomed them courteously enough, and they followed her through a hall into a long, dim drawing-room, where linen-shrouded chairs loomed ghostly, and they caught a glimpse of the library down a vista of gloom, which was here and there streaked with gleams of light as a stray beam filtered through the jealous shutters and struck some rich bric-a-brac on the marble mantels or the carving of a gold framed painting, itself but a square of black.

The silence and dimness oppressed them, as did the heavy odór of potpourri from the high-shouldered Tsang jars guarding the library door. Indeed, to Virginia's keen sensibilities, everything about the house seemed under ward, and there was a breath of secrecy and watchfulness in the air that manifested even in the soft swish of the mistress' skirts as she trailed into the deeper dusk of the library, leaving them silently uncomfortable; though Virginia reveled in the faded magnificence of it all, and

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even had an artistic appreciation of their hostess' weary hauteur.

They talked a little in low tones, for it somehow seemed incumbent to make no noise in this ancient abode of silences, Miss Louisy taking a plaintive leave of her child. Clara Elwell, more than usually subdued by her grave surroundings, whispered that she would write every week, predicting dolefully that she wouldn't have "a bit good time in St. Louis without Virg, and knowing that she was bored to death way out here."

Virginia laughed, her girlish voice waking echoes in these rooms so long strange to any cheerful sound, for even the bird songs from the shrubbery rang plaintively here, and the sad call of the dove seemed but to awaken kindred sighs from the heart of Riverhouse.

"I can hardly wait for you to go," she chirped. "It's just like opening the leaves of a perfectly grand book like 'Mysteries of Udolpho' or 'Children of the Abbey.' Do you remember our reading the 'Children' aloud at recess, Clara, and how mad I got because you all laughed at me for making such a funny mis-

take where Amanda said, 'Hail, sweet asylum of my infancy?' I said 'as-sal-lam.' "

There was a sort of gasp behind them, and Mrs. Putnam leaned against the door, with Aunt Viney's anxious face peering over her shoulder. Her eyes were closed, and she pressed her hand to her heart. Yet she waved Miss Louisy imperiously to her seat, declaring nothing was the matter, and, recovering herself in a marvelously short time, was soon directing Viney to serve them from the silver tray she bore, with chicken sandwiches, white iced sponge cake, and a sparkling sweet wine. "It was nothing," she said impatiently, in answer to Miss Louisy's solicitation,—“nothing but the heat and the fact that I have a weak heart. That is why I so detest noise; I could never have a loud person about me. I like your voice, child.”

As her guests ate, she paused in her restless wanderings about the room and stood beside Virginia,—a tall severe figure outlined against the marble of the mantel against which she leaned. Taking the girl's chin in her hand, she gazed into her clear eyes; then, as if inspired to

unwonted candor by their limpidity, she continued in a lower voice, as though she had forgotten her hearers:

"It was nothing, only her voice is like the voice of one I loved and lost; and to hear her repeat the opening lines of that old tale he used to read to me in this very room, and what with there being some slight resemblance, I felt as if I had suddenly seen a ghost."

Her voice broke, and she turned away toward the library as if to hide her emotion, and because the room was a large one and the distance really great, and her voice had sunk almost to a whisper, it came moaning back to them like the sigh of the wind. "O me, a ghost of my old happiness,—long, long since dead!"

CHAPTER XVII

The prophecy that life at Riverhouse would prove agreeable was a true one, for Virginia, fitting into the place as if she had been born behind its old red walls, joyed in the dainty fare, the rich furnishings, and the elegancies of living. Following the custom of the servants, she called Mrs. Putnam "Madam," and had occasion to feel grateful for many careless kindnesses from that austere lady. If it was cool or damp, a fire was lighted in the brass-fitted grate in her room; if she liked a certain dish, Viney was ordered to make it again.

Virginia's room, with its deep blue velvet carpet, brown marble mantel and carved mirror, matching the decoration of grapes and cupids upon the other furniture, was a never-ending source of delight to her; as was also a tiny white-tiled lavatory, with marble basin and a red velvet rug upon its shining floor. For Riverhouse had its windmill and water-tower, and, though set miles in the woods in the days

when sewerage was unknown to Sedgebury, it was carefully piped for water, and drained.

Although Virginia's room lay at the end of a wing on the second floor, and, as she said, "nearly a block" from Madam's, she did not feel lonely, even at night when the corners of her room lay in shadow, untouched by the lamp light. But, safe in bed, with a cheery little fire crooning in the grate, she readily fell asleep, despite the plaintive whip-poor-wills in the shrubbery and the black night without; for it must be full-moon ere any light penetrated the foliage about Riverhouse. She wrote Louisy that she now knew the meaning of "as dark as midnight in Egypt"; though, being free from superstition, with a busy, happy mind, the loneliness and silence did not trouble her.

Virginia breakfasted alone in the only light and airy room on the first floor, for the dining-room, like the apartments they had first seen, was kept closed, and was damp, musty and most uncomfortable, despite its dreary grandeur, its closets of beautiful china and crystal, and the heavy old silver weighing sideboard and serving tables.

Owing to a leak, the breakfast room had been freshly papered in purple grapes running over a trellis, with swallows flitting along its high border upon the cloud-like ceiling. As she never anticipated that Madam Putnam would come here, Virginia dared to open the long windows and placed a bowl of nasturtiums on the table. She brought the canary down from his dim retreat in Mrs. Putnam's upstairs sitting-room, and, on timidly mentioning that he seemed to like it, the lady gave permission that his cage might hang there; and the little singer showed his appreciation of the change by nearly splitting his throat in the sunshine.

After a week or two, Madam made another concession to her young companion by lunching in the bright, pretty room, and they finally deserted the dreary dining-room entirely, and, to Virginia's delight, Madam appeared to eat with a new relish, and finally to really enjoy their cozy meals.

Unconscious that she had come, as an angel, to minister to a sick soul, Virginia moved happily about, letting light and air into the great rooms whenever she could, as she was letting light and love into a darkened, moribund mind.

She read to Madam every day for two or three hours. The selections varied from Muhl-bach's novels to Spenser. It never seemed to occur to Mrs. Putnam that some of the reading was hardly suitable for a young girl. Indeed, like Napoleon, her only thought was self, and she treated Virginia as she did every one, with a cold courtesy which did not include any interest whatever in her personality—a courtesy that seemed by its hauteur to proceed rather from her own notion as to what was due herself than them. Her coldness extended to even the great staghound, Boreus, for if he rubbed against her dress and licked her hand it never gave an answering caress. Perhaps that was why Boreus fell in love with Virginia, and soon ran to paw about her in clumsy glee when the early afternoon brought around the hour for their walk; and though he still paid loyal respect to his mistress, Virginia had all his dog heart. Madam Putnam spoke of this one afternoon as they came in, appearing a trifle more cold than was her wont. They were standing in the hall, Virginia's hands full of black-eyed Susans and golden-rod.

"See how easily Boreus forgets his old friends. All love is as fleeting." There was a dreary bitterness in her voice that hinted of more than mere cynicism, and it made the girl's heart ache, though she could not have told why.

"Oh, no, Madam. We are all God's children," she said eagerly, anxious to pass on some of the gladness of her New Way. "I read this morning that God, Who is Love can never be separated for a moment from man, who is His image, and it made me happy all day, for I felt His love shining down on all His creatures and on all the lovely things He has made,—His life reflected by birds and flowers and all the outside things, and me, too."

Madam Putnam stared. If Boreus had begun a dissertation on the rhythm of the *Iliad*, she could not have felt greater surprise. The girl had more than once aroused her interest by her frankness and good manners, and had occasionally made her think of some one and something besides herself and her troubles.

As they sat in the pink-shaded light of the dinner-candles that evening, when Charlotte had served the coffee and left the room, she leaned across the table, where Virginia had set

some late roses, her long, black-clad arm laid on the snowy damask. As she looked from the rosy flowers to the rosy face behind them, Madam's sombre countenance brightened somewhat. This was surely better than solitary gazing at the discolored walls of the dining-room.

Virginia, who never intruded upon her moods, drank her coffee, silently waiting until Madam Putnam spoke.

"What did you mean, child, to-day when you spoke of man being God's image?"

She smiled a little as she asked the question. Perhaps the learned doctors in the temple smiled so when they began to question the carpenter's young son. But "out of the mouths of babes" will Truth and Love continue to be declared, while the learned doctors wrangle and, like old Omar, come out no wiser than they went in.

"What do *you* know about these things? Surely you are too young to have read the philosophers," she added.

Virginia was not quite certain as to who the philosophers were, but she answered readily:

"Why, you know, Madam, the Bible says we

are made in God's image and likeness and that we live and move and have our being in Him; and Miss Duncan, from Delmas, says that man exists in God, just as our own mortal thoughts are in our minds. It was hard for me to understand at first, for I didn't know then that this body wasn't me." Virginia paused to laugh at her own ignorance of her spiritual entity, totally unaware that the lady across the table and thousands of others, had they ever thought of it at all, would have said that *they* were bodies.

"Well, I just couldn't get it into my head until one day at school I looked for the first time through the microscope and saw the *animaculæ* skipping round in a drop of water. Then it came to me—that passage, I mean,—‘For in Him we live and move and have our being.’ And then I found some verses about the fishes saying they knew where the rocks and sand were, but where was the water? And the birds asking where was the air,—for they could see everything else but air. And so now, every time I feel afraid or sad or angry I say to myself that ‘God is love,’ and St. James says He is the ‘Father of lights,’ and a sort of quiet

feeling comes over me, just as if I sat safe in a warm, bright room with somebody I loved very much!"

The somber face across the table twitched. "The peace that passeth all understanding," she murmured, and rising she hurried from the room, without giving any directions for the evening. Virginia usually read to her until nine. Sometimes they walked on the terrace under the stars or sat on the ruined portico and watched the moon, like an orange-hued melon handed up the eastern sky by some invisible genii servitor.

"Peace?" Madam Putnam queried, as she walked the length of the dark drawing-room, where the gleam of the hall lamp but accentuated the gloom, relieved only by ghostly fingers of moonlight, that, slipping through the shutters, seemed to point at the tall figure pacing restlessly there, a shadow among shadows.

"Is there any real joy and peace to be found in all this weary earth? God is not all good, or He cannot be all-powerful, with all this woe and wickedness in a world which He created."

In the midst of her bitter musings her heart gave a bound—a cry leaped to her lips. Out

of the darkness before her a pale light glimmered and a young face was profiled against the brightness—a face with wavy hair back-tossed and eager lips apart. It was the face of her only son, many years dead and buried in the far-off Southland.

Then the blood came back with a rush. In the small morning-room across the hall, Virginia had lighted the jeweled lamp which a bronze Nubian bore aloft. This a mirror had reflected, together with the girl's head as she bent over the piano.

Virginia had a good ear, and had been taught to read music at school; so she ventured now and then to touch the keys softly when Madam was upstairs. And now, unaware of her proximity, she played a few chords and sang:

* "Thou wilt bind the stubborn will,
Wound the callous breast;
Make self-righteousness be still,
Break earth's stupid rest.

"So when day grows dark and cold,
Tear or triumph harms,
Lead Thy lambkins to the fold,
Take them in Thy arms.

* "Poems" by Mary Baker Eddy.

"Feed the hungry, heal the heart,
Till the morning's beam;
White as wool, ere they depart,
Shepherd, wash them clean."

The air was plaintively sweet with a recurring minor chord that somehow soothed and comforted the listener, though she did not know whether it was the words or the melody which reached her heart and dimmed the eyes unused to tears; but as she sat there, she felt as if an arm had been flung around her, as if a voice she had thought death-stilled were murmuring loving words of comfort and protection.

Long after Virginia had closed the piano and gone out on the steps to sit star-gazing, with Boreus nuzzling her hand, the mistress of Riverhouse sat musing.

"How like, how like!" she kept muttering. "She would have been the age of this one, almost. But what am I thinking of? White told me last week the child was in St. Louis at school. Cornelia Putnam, you are growing dotardly. If this was the girl, she had better be dead than come to claim me. The 'Blot on the Scutcheon,' surely!"

She arose and walked down the hall. As she

went upstairs she still muttered, after the manner of the isolated who make confidants of themselves.

"The Putnam scutcheon has been a white one, and a proud." A frown darkened her haughty face, and she slightly raised a hand as if in oath. "And should I, the last of the Putnams,—should I hesitate to wipe out such a blot?"

CHAPTER XVIII

The dressing of Madam Putnam's hair was usually a simple operation, as it was drawn up on top of her head and fastened there by a tortoise-shell comb. This morning, however, the process had been complicated by the nervousness of the lady, who tapped her foot and shook her head, now and then almost jerking the braid from Charlotte's hands. Finally she broke out sharply.

"Charlotte, who are the parents of the girl I have here from Sedgebury?"

It was one of Madam's peculiarities that she never referred to persons by name, but spoke of them as if their insignificance was unworthy of specific designation.

"La, now, Madam, yo' have got me sho'. Virginy hain't got no payrents. She was brung up at the po'-house, where her mammy died a-bornin' her."

"Did you ever see the other girl there whom the overseer has recently sent to school in St.

Louis?" the mistress inquired carelessly, examining the maid's handiwork in a heavy silver hand-mirror.

Charlotte was perplexed. "Ever since Granma's been workin' there, I've been in an' out, as you know, mam, an' I ain't never seen no other gal there 'ceptin' this here one of Ella Byrd's. You might remember that young lady, mam. She was here onct with some young folks from Delmas on Mas' Del's birthday. He danced mos' with her, an' when I was bringin' in the sillybub, I hearn him tell her that she looked like peaches an' cream in her white dress. After you-all went South, the po' little gal got in trouble, an' her grampa turned her out, an'—"

Charlotte's chatter ceased in a gasp, frozen on her lips. She had caught sight of a white, angry face in the mirror, wherein two dark eyes blazed. The lips moved silently, and the raised hand of the rigid figure hurled the heavy hand-glass at the terrified servant, who dodged and ran shrieking from the room, never stopping until she reached the kitchen.

Madam had been cross, contrary, abusive before, but never like this. There was murder in

her eyes, and it took half an hour for Aunt Viney to coax the frightened maid into calmness; and not until a cup of water had been flung in her face did she cease to shiver and moan and gasp, "O, my Master!" And then, to Viney's great disgust, all she had to reveal was that Madam had tried to brain her with her hand-glass and had looked awful.

Meantime, Madam slowly regained control of a temper that was almost diabolical, in that, when it possessed her, she was as much its victim as the devil-possessed whose father told the Master, "Oft it teareth him and driveth him into waste places." Cornelia Putnam had walked in the waste places for many years, but she had yet to learn that it was her own "familiar" that drove her there with the whips of pride and hatred.

She was still in a loose morning wrapper, and as she walked the floor she flung it from her as if stifling. Taking a sponge from her dresser and saturating it with aromatic toilet water she passed it over her face and long white arms, as if she were trying to revive a fainting person. She thought of Virginia's declaration that the body was not the individ-

ual, and found that she was really ministering to her self as if she, the angry, haughty entity whose fierce onslaught had almost overpowered the fragile body, were trying, with somewhat disdainful kindness, to repair the injury. Finally the overcharged heart ceased to pound against her bosom, her breathing became more normal, and she could go back to her chair by the mirror, where she sat gazing at her pallid face, and now and then passing her hand back over the creature's hair as if she strove to soothe it. After a while she addressed the image in the glass.

"So that villain befooled me, and this *is* the child, after all. Strange I should sit supinely all these years after I knew Ella Byrd left a child over there. Why did I not do the thing myself, if I wanted it well done? I suppose I never dreamed a moment of that ignorant bully outwitting me. What has he done with that money, if they kept the girl at the poor-farm? Now, Cornelia, I see what you've really wanted all these years, though you would not admit it even to yourself. You've wanted the girl *dead*. How foolish to cover your head like an ostrich and find that you are only half hidden,

after all! And I wasn't sure even when she came into the house. I believe the little woman did say she had adopted the girl, or some such stuff. Have I brooded so much on the past that my wits are becoming dull? And all these years my good Mr. White has been obtaining money under false pretenses and keeping this nettle growing right under my nose to sting me when it was ripe."

She tugged at the velvet bell-cord. She had to ring twice before Viney, cringingly apprehensive, appeared, with apologies for Charlotte, who "had done had a spell" and couldn't attend her mistress.

The lady smiled grimly, but made no comment.

"Send Joe to the poor-farm for Peter White," she said laconically; and Aunt Viney, relieved that no physical violence had been visited upon her, hurried away to summon Joe and bring up the breakfast tray, which stood green-garnished and attractive on the serving table in the pantry.

In her haste, Viney had left the door ajar, and when she returned with the tray she forgot to close it as she retreated precipitously to the

kitchen, mistrustful of the calm that seemed to envelop her mistress; for she had given some soft-spoken direction.

Half-dressed as she was, Mrs. Putnam began to breakfast. There were waffles, honey, broiled tomatoes, and a stack of crisp toast. As she was raising the fragrant coffee to her lips, through the corridor from down stairs came the ring of a fresh young voice. Virginia was singing in the morning-room.

"Thou wilt bind the stubborn will,
Wound the callous breast;
Make self-righteousness be still,
Break earth's stupid rest."

Mrs. Putnam rose impatiently and slammed the door, and nothing more disturbing broke the summer silence than the whirring of the grasshoppers on the lawn below her window and the plaintive cooing of a dove from the shrubbery.

Yet the breakfast cooled while the lady lay back in her chair clutching the half-emptied cup, until Aunt Viney came and carried away the rejected meal.

CHAPTER XIX

It was evening. A cool breeze came up from the river with a smell of Aunt Viney's pinks on its breath, and whispered about at the shuttered windows of Madam's rooms. Inside, the candles were already lit, and the mistress sat straight and black-robed as usual, her chair drawn up to a table where a tin box lay; at strange variance with a plumed fan, a cut-glass amyl bottle, and a lace handkerchief,—all flung across rarely bound books beside a silver candelabra.

They had dined without a word, but as it was now well into August and Virginia had been at Riverhouse long enough to understand the moods of its mistress, she was not disturbed by the silence, and went happily enough to read in the library, which Charlotte now lighted every evening.

At eight o'clock, Virginia saw a buggy drive up with a familiar figure in it. The drive curved by the library windows, and the light

from the lamp struck full across Peter White's face. Virginia thought he looked thin and worried, and indeed, Peter, as soon as he was aware of Virginia's visit to Riverhouse, said to himself, "The jig's up, and I'll have to face the music, I reckon. I've got one card to play, though, my proud Madam, that you ain't lookin' for."

For all his bluster, Peter was not comfortable, for Madam Putnam was a person of wealth and influence, and, as he had cause to know, a person of very uncertain temper, and Peter realized that he was within reach of the law, if she chose to prosecute him.

"It would be funny," he mused, as he came up the drive,—“it would be funny if I got out of a criminal suit an' then got pinched on a civil one.”

Had he spoken aloud? Peter looked about apprehensively, but only saw the rough head of Boreus, who growled at him from the library window.

"You took your own time in coming," said Mrs. Putnam tartly when he had been shown up to the sitting-room.

Elegance and wealth embarrassed the over-

seer, and to show his disdain of them, he assumed a truculent attitude as he entered and stood before the lady, his hat ungraciously removed under her cold stare. He had worn it into the house to show his independence.

"Sit down," she commanded. "I want to talk with you. How much money have I paid you during these fifteen years?"

Peter told her.

"You told me the girl had been educated in Delmas, and came home for the summer to visit you at the farm as your niece. You told me this the year before last, when she frightened me in the garden. This year I gave you extra money to send her to a boarding school in St. Louis. The girl has never been schooled at all, at least not by you, and a woman in the village adopted her. Obtaining money under false pretenses is a grave charge, Mr. White. I shall send for my lawyer to-morrow."

Peter laughed sneeringly.

"O come, Ma'am, I wouldn't be so rash if I was you; I'd think it over. I see you've found me out, and now what are you goin' to do about it?"

Mrs. Putnam's proud face flushed at this insolence, but she kept her temper.

"I shall tell Mr. Elwell how my charity has gone amiss all these years, and how, instead of educating a waif I took an interest in, you, a county officer, misappropriated the funds I advanced for that purpose, allowing the girl to grow up a county charge."

"That's all good soundin' enough, Ma'am," Peter grinned, "but sposin' I am brought up on this charge an' I up an' tells Lawyer Elwell whose child that young gal is?"

"What do you mean, man?" the pale lips rather framed than spoke. Mrs. Putnam reached for her aml. "I do not know whose child she is! What has her parentage to do with me?" She drew herself up haughtily, her voice strong again.

"The mother of the gal had some papers, Ma'am,—some letters from a gentleman, signed 'D. P.' and sometimes 'Delbert,' sayin' he would come of age in a few months, and then everything would be all right."

The fragile glass of the vinaigrette broke in Madam Putnam's grasp. The blood started

from her hand, but she wrapped her handkerchief absently about it, motioning him to continue. She was thinking of a pair of derringers lying in the drawer of a gold-lacquered cabinet behind Peter, and picturing just what would ensue if she shot him. Believing he had intimidated her, he proceeded in high glee.

The woman before him had never yet met with opposition; defiance or disobedience was unknown to her. And this clown sat in her own house and dared to tell her of her dead son's sin—dared to reflect on the honor of a great family!

She rose and went swiftly behind the smirking villain. A turn of the key, and one of the little pistols lay underneath her lace-bandaged hand.

Peter had stopped talking. There was menace in the air. He could not see what she took from the drawer, but he, like Charlotte, had seen her face in the dressing-table mirror. As she turned composedly toward him, the sweat started out on his low forehead. He grinned a sickly grin as he jerked out his bandanna and wiped it.

"It's a warm night, Ma'am." His voice was conciliatory. To himself he was saying: "Peter, play your trump."

"We was a-talkin' about your boy, Ma'am." He gulped, and went on hurriedly. "I guess you ain't never knowed it, but he *married* that gal the night of his birthday party here."

The derringer dropped from the lady's hand into a white fur rug at her feet.

"*What?*"

"Yes'm. The girl had a carpet-sack, and after she was buried, I found the letters and her license. Old Squire married 'em in Sedgelybury."

"The license, you fool! Where is it?" she cried out hoarsely, with a grasp on his rough wrist like an iron bracelet.

Peter was surprised out of prudence.

"It's lost," he stammered, "all of them are. I told my wife to throw the old grip away, intendin' to get the papers out that night; but I went to town and got a little too much aboard and forgot all about 'em for a day or two, and then she said she'd burned it in the trash when she cleaned house."

The cold fingers relaxed, and Madame Putnam returned to her chair, to sit shading her face with the bandaged hand.

"I've a sort of partner in this business," Peter went on hurriedly. He was furious at his slip, for he had intended to let her think he had the papers. He felt the need of fortifying himself. "Sands, over at the farm near me, he caught onto my game, and I had to divy. Well, he had come upon a document himself in a mighty funny way that made his partnership worth while, Ma'am,—he a-knowin' about the marriage license. I can tell you."

"Sands? I don't know any such person." What new bludgeon was fate preparing to strike her with? She was past being astonished, though, she thought.

"Oh, yes, you do. Farmer Jezreel. He's brought your wood ten years."

The bandaged hand signified she remembered.

Peter was at his ease again. She looked very haggard and tame now, and he was in his glory when he was bullying.

"Well, I've told you so much I guess you

and me is almost partners now, too. So I'll tell you this. You ain't lost anything lately, have you?"

She started. "Yes, some papers from this box," pointing to the battered tin receptacle. "I walked in my sleep last winter, and must have opened it then. When I found them gone, I blamed a servant; but subsequently awaking one night with the open box in my hand, I decided that I had destroyed the document in my sleep."

The overseer chuckled. "Well, Ma'am, you did try. Last winter when Joe was down with rheumatiz, Sands came with a load of wood, and the colored woman in the kitchen asked him to take up a few armsful to your settin'-room." He pointed through the curtained arch behind her.

She nodded.

"Well, when Jez went to lay the logs on the hearth, he noticed a paper stickin' outen the ashes, and it proved to be a letter and a document. The letter was from a man in Virginy, and dated nearly thirty years back. It was a awful mad-like letter, Ma'am, a-callin' you

devil-tempered and such like bad names, and saying you would be punished far beyond him leavin' all he had to your boy."

The lady never moved as the malicious voice droned on; but her bitter heart was crying, "All Thy waves are gone over me." And she told herself that this was indeed meet punishment—that she should bear the taunts of this thieving churl.

The letter had been written by her father following one of their many quarrels. As a widow, and mistress of his house, she frustrated a proposed second marriage and returned his angry reproaches with interest. On leaving Virginia, Mrs. Putnam removed to a property her husband had bought cheaply, as an investment, during a western trip, little thinking that in after years it would become his wife's home.

With the letter was Colonel Bayne's will, disinheriting his daughter in favor of her son and his heirs. This she had discovered when summoned to his death-bed, and had not scrupled to conceal it.

Though she had never intended wronging her son, as the years spun out the pitiful trag-

edy of Delbert Putnam's life, bringing at his death the knowledge of a posthumous child, Madam Putnam justified herself in secreting the will and rejoicing angrily that the girl who had won Delbert died in the poor-house, leaving her child a pauper.

She recalled all this while listening to the overseer. When he paused, significantly, she could keep silent no longer.

"The will, man! He found my father's will?"

"The other doc-u-ment, Ma'am," went on her tormentor, "*was* a will."

She leaned toward him. "Where is it?"

But Peter had been caught once, and he was not going to make another mistake. He took a large parchment envelope from his pocket. "It was in this, warn't it? Well, Sands he's got it, Ma'am."

This was untrue, for at that moment the will lay in his bill-book, where he had carried it since his murderous assault on the old farmer. Riding to town after their quarrel, Sands had told him the incident and shown him the will, and to gain possession of it, the overseer had lain in wait for his crony.

"What does he want for it?" Mrs. Putnam was cool and businesslike now.

"Why, he's turned the trade over to me, and I'm thinkin' some of movin' West. Wife ain't none too strong, and the work at the farm is pretty hard, now your gran'darter ain't there to help."

Mrs. Putnam turned livid. She sprang forward as if to strike him, then fell back in her chair, half suffocated by the blood surging through her arteries. Peter, alarmed, reached for the carafe and poured out a glass of water. She feebly motioned him to let her alone, and after a few moments was able to question him.

"Well, your price?"

The overseer scratched his head, pretending to consider, though he had already made up his mind.

"I could buy a good farm for eight thousand or so. Eight's my price!"

"I should have to take time to think it over. You ask a great deal," she said wearily, laying the bandaged hand across her eyes. "Go now, and I will let you know my decision tomorrow."

Peter rose, disappointed that he had not

moved her to tears. He had expected her to fall at his feet and beg for mercy. As he passed out, he could not forbear a parting shot.

"Good-night, Ma'am. As I come in I see Virgie (that's what we called her at the farm), all dressed up fine as a fiddle, a-settin' in the room with all the books in it, and I said to myself, 'Well, to be sure, Missy, you'll forget you ever washed dishes at the pore-farm when you finds out you own all this property, and Lord knows how much more.'"

The proud figure in the arm-chair twitched. So, with a parting glance of gratified malice he left her, stiff and motionless in the flickering candle light, one jeweled hand still pressed against the down-leaned cheek, the other lying limply on the table.

A clock downstairs struck ten. The rooms were dim as he passed down the stairs, but there was a light in the hall, and old Joe nodded by the door waiting to see him out. Joe ranked Peter as "po' white trash" so did not offer to untie his horse, and shut the door on him as speedily as possible.

A storm was coming up, and the oppressive heat seemed the result of the lightning firing

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the rolling clouds. The wind blew from the river with an eerie moan, twisting the old trees about the mansion; and, though it was some miles to town, Peter could hear the roar of the dam between the deeper rumbles of the thunder. As he turned into the lane, and so toward the high road, he mused to himself.

"Gosh to hemlock, I bet we're in for a nasty storm. The river's been up for a week, and there's been lots of rain up toward Wichita. That old house would be in a bad fix if the river would break over; it's almost on a per-ninchular."

Just then his stumbling nag demanded his attention, and he turned into the main road, leaving Riverhouse with the storm moaning through its pines and the river muttering menace.

CHAPTER XX

Charlotte was a pious soul, and very sincere in her religious beliefs. The happenings at Miss Louisy's had stirred her greatly, and, having a childlike mind, she eagerly seized any crumb from the table of Truth. It seemed to her that Virginia's coming had dispelled the gloom which had enwrapped the old house for years, and, becoming more and more certain that right thinking was a great destroyer of sorrow and anger, she asked so many questions that Virginia began to answer them each night after Madam Putnam had dismissed her.

On the night of Peter's visit, Charlotte combed out Virginia's hair, and then, smiling mysteriously, unfolded a parcel, disclosing a kimona of violet silk. It had lain for years in its box, and Charlotte, discovering it in repacking a trunk, had obtained Mrs. Putnam's permission to give it to Virginia. When it had been duly admired, she put it on, while Char-

lotte drew up her chair to the book-laden table, and the real business of the evening began.

Beside Virginia's Bible lay Miss Louisy's commentary. "This book, Charlotte, is to the Bible what the new electric lights are to Delmas, for it lights up all the dark places for me, and it's made it a book that I am glad to study continually, where I used to read it only on Sundays. Our Sunday School work at Delmas is divided up into daily lessons by this Quarterly, with the Bible references in it, and this one is about the *Unrealness of Evil*, Charlotte; and I tell you, it's a hard one. There's lots I can't understand, but the Master said you must be as a little child to enter the kingdom of Heaven; and I suppose that means to believe and mind Him by trying to do the things He did."

Truly, the problem of evil is a hard one and an old one. The torture fires have lit saints to heaven over it; the madhouse has barred its students from home and friends. Armies have been mown from the battlefields of earth like daisies from the grass; missionaries have braved death in swamp, in jungle, and in ice-

berg, to hold aloft this Excelsior banner, going down to death crying, "God is, and good *reigns*."

The clergy have shouted it from their pulpits into unhearing ears. For ages, philosophers have written libraries over it, and poets scrawled tomes about it. Only here and there in some lowly heart is the altar white and the fire of consecration burning. Only a few are pure enough—only a few, out of all the millions of earth's children, are simple enough and good enough—to walk the way of their Elder Brother, doing the works He did, serving at Truth's shrine.

As Virginia read aloud, Charlotte sat silently intent. The lamplight flooded the purple negligee and glinted in the curls around the girl's earnest face as she leaned over her Bible expounding the old, old teaching that lifts man above the thrall of matter into his glorious heritage of the all-encircling Good. Outside, the rain had begun to lash the window-panes, and now and then the light flickered in some furtive draught; but the earnest student did not notice.

"I can't get it straight, honey." Charlotte's

brow was puckered, and she shook her head. "I knows all them Scripters is right, an' the little book makes it all plain; but what beats me is, I can't see how we-all is done went on all these years killin' an' stealin' an' all kinds of devilment, an' bein' sick an' dyin', if them things ain't real."

Virginia looked worried.

"Dear me, Charlotte, if I had studied more, I might explain it; but it's so hard to answer arguments like that. Yet I know that they are not true, and prove it every once in a while, though I can't put it into words. Miss Duncan says it's all in the Bible, and we can understand if we study it; but I can't answer in a few words what the author of this commentary took years to write and nearly five hundred pages to teach. But it's like the difference between real and ordinary lace; the imitation seems fine and all right until you see the real and learn the difference.

"Everything comes from thinking. And our bodies get sick because they are the paper, and we are the printers who print sick thoughts on them; and everybody has been printing sick thoughts on bodies for hundreds of years, until

you don't always have to think sick yourself to get that way, for folks have kept on saying certain symptoms mean certain diseases, and if you go where certain diseases are you'll catch them, until all this mortal mind thought makes it hard for anybody to be well or good who thinks he is material, and not a spiritual image of God who is never sick or bad. And now folks are waking up to this truth and are trying to stop thinking the thoughts that make them and the whole world sick and bad. Weren't you ever just sure about a thing, and then after a while found out you were wrong?"

Charlotte's dark face flashed with the white ivory of her smile.

"For the land's sake, child, I sho' have! Why, when I was a little gal, I knew for certain that I had a gizzard like chickens, an', bein' a powerful argufyin' youngun, I'd argue with my little master, that was Del Putnam, Madam's son who's dead. One year, though, ole Marse had a edicated colored man come out from New York to teach the darkies. There was a school at the town next our plantation, and as our folks didn't suffer much from the war, why, things warn't so much changed

after it; only the niggers offen the Putnam place scattered some and them that stayed home (nearly forty they was), drew wages instead of rations, and had to work harder, I tells you. Well, mam, that school teacher boarded at Mammy's, and that winter he had a 'natomy book what tells about your insides; and I hunted an' hunted that book, spellin' out the hard words, 'cause I was a good big gal, nearly ten then, and up in my a-b-abs, I can tell yer. I's so anxious to find a picture of that gizzard, to come it over Marse Del when he come home from school in Richmond; but though I hunted from kiver to kiver of that there 'natomy, nary a hair or hide could I find of that inard, and finally asked teacher. Honey, you ought to have heard that man laugh. He was a tall and skinny yaller nigger, and solemn, with a big white collar round his Adam's apple, and big round specs on his nose, makin' him for all the world like a big barn owl. Laugh! That man split the button-hole on his collar, and hollered so loud that Mammy come out with her light bread dough all on her hands a-hollerin', 'Whar's the fire?' thinkin' he was the siren whistle over to the

factory. Well, then he splaned to me how we was fuxed up inside, and I had to lose that gizzard right there, though I tells you it was mighty real to me, Miss Virginy,—mighty real!”

Virginia clapped her hands.

“That’s it, Charlotte; it didn’t make you have the wrong organs because you thought you had, and the other right ones just went on acting despite your declaring there was something doing the work that never existed. God made man *good* and *harmonious* in the start; and Miss Duncan says that means healthy, too; and there is no power working but God’s power, just as there is no dark (it’s just where the light isn’t). But God’s light shines everywhere, Charlotte; you know we read to-night, ‘The light shineth in darkness, and it comprehendeth it not,’ because light puts out darkness, and melts it away into its nothingness, like the sun melts the mist. Here is the idea.” And the girl scribbled excitedly on a tablet that lay near, for she always studied with a pencil in her hand. “Here’s what comes into my mind. I didn’t make it up, but it’s parts of things we’ve been studying to-night:

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"Perfect Love casteth out fear;
God, Love, is *all*,
So Love is here.
If Love be here,
I am aware
Evil and fear
Can be nowhere."

The gilt clock on the mantel struck eleven, and Charlotte, shocked at the lateness of the hour, rose precipitately. Only waiting to see Virginia safe in bed, she put out the light and turned the night-latch on the door as she went. When her footfalls had died away, Virginia lay wide-eyed for some time. The lightning flashed through the shutters now and then, and the thunder often rendered the clock's tick inaudible. Then, drowsily humming a tune, she curled up in bed like a cozy kitten, and was soon asleep.

CHAPTER XXI

By twelve o'clock the wind assaulted the house fiercely, rattling its panes, shrieking around corners, and rumbling in its tall old chimneys. Save for a faint gleam from Madam Putnam's window, the place was dark and silent amid the roar of the storm, seeming to shrink deeper into its shrubbery—to tremble, now and then, as the thunder boomed over it.

To the woman in the shadow-haunted room above the portico, the clash of the elements was but an orchestral accompaniment to the fierce tumult within. Anger, sorrow, hate and pride plucked at her heart-strings, eliciting the wildest inharmonies. Old memories peered through the curtains of time with malicious, mocking faces.

Alone in the night and storm, Cornelia Putnam struggled with the "principalities and powers of darkness." How had she sunk low enough to come into the sphere of a petty villain

like Peter White? Had her pride and vaunted integrity been so besmirched that she had become, as he said, a sort of partner in this sorry business, no whit less culpable than he? As long as she could brand her grandchild with illegitimacy, she had some defense against conscience, which was ever whispering accusingly of the hour when she had hurried Delbert to Virginia, feigning an illness which necessitated an immediate change of climate. Hardly had they reached the South when he had been stricken by yellow fever, and she had intercepted Ella Byrd's tear-stained letters, and mingled her wild sorrow over the loss of her boy with bitter resentment against the love that had usurped a mother's. Even in death the girl had stood between them, for Delbert with his last breath begged her to "be good to Ella."

Months later sitting black-garbed and bitter-hearted in the desolation of Riverhouse, she exulted in the death of her pitiful rival. She even smiled gloomily and quoted, "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay"; firmly believing that the God of vengeance and hatred whom she served had visited His wrath on this

person who had dared to come between her and her son.

But Peter White's ruthless hand had torn the bandages of self-justification from her eyes and shown her the workings of a wicked will that did not scruple to destroy any obstacle in its path.

"You are dead and out of the misery of life," she told the reproachful phantoms of the lovers, as they seemed to point mournfully at the havoc she had wrought. "Hell is here, and I am in it. I held my skirts away from love that I deemed unlawful, and crushed the offenders into the dust; and now I keep company with thieves; and there is not 'a blot on the scutcheon' save that *I* put there. Should all this come out, the girl will have the aid of many willing hands; 'the wooers throng to the door wherever Fortune knocks.' The small farm in Virginia is mine, and some few thousands, and the rest—the jewels, the plate, the mines, and this estate—would belong to the child of that country fool. Why, I hate *her* a thousand times more since I have found her virtuous and able to leave a lawful heir to Delbert's estate."

One by one the candles flared out. As the last was flickering in its socket, the hall clock struck one. Mrs. Putnam sprang up. What was it Charlotte had told her of the girl's queer luggage the morning after her arrival? She surely laughed at a band-box and the *red carpet bag* Virginia had brought from Sedgebury.

"Nonsense!" She sat down again in the grease-scented darkness. "I am surely going mad! How on earth could it chance that this very girl, of all people, should have that old bag?"

For some moments she argued pro and con. Reason urged against the probability of White's wife deceiving him about destroying the worthless thing, or of the overseer's misrepresenting the facts when she would have paid him his own price for the papers. Yet a voice within her kept whispering that *this* might prove to be the old carpet sack, and that the license and letters that established the legitimacy of Virginia might still be hidden in its lining.

Madam Putnam rose and felt her way to a chiffonier. Finding there a candle-stick and fresh candle and lighting it, she took from a

drawer a long steel paper-knife, whose blade glittered menacingly in her shaking hand. Out in the corridor, she unlocked a closet and took down the great ring of house keys, detaching two; for the room next to Virginia's opened into it. The keys slid from the ring without a jingle. The candle burned clearly, shielded from draughts by the hand still wrapped in a handkerchief. She moved, a silent, black-robed figure, through the shadowy, storm-beaten house.

The wind had fallen, and only an intermittent gleam now lit up the inky landscape outside. But, though the thunder and lightning had subsided, the rain continued to pour steadily, remorselessly down, beating against the house with a sound like the wash of some inland lake.

In Virginia's room, even the silvery glimmer of the mirror was drowned in blackness. Into this blackness the girl woke with a start to find herself sitting up in bed, with a heart beating so fast against her side that she could hear its thump.

What had wakened her? She had been fathoms deep in a dream about Miss Louisy

and Clara in a pretty room, and all at once the room had grown dark and cold, their flesh crinkled, and they sat watching a closed door across from them, behind which some danger threatened. Yet there they sat, powerless to move. Then her friends faded, and Virginia found herself alone in bed, fearfully gazing through the darkness toward a door that opened into one of the many closed and empty chambers of Riverhouse. This door was locked, she knew, and a light stand stood before it.

Was it only the rush of rain she heard, or had a stealthy footstep crossed that empty room? Pshaw! the thunder had wakened her out of a bad dream, and it *was* the rain, after all. What a noise it did make, to be sure! If this kept up, they couldn't get to town for weeks maybe. The lane turned into the main road half a mile above the one that led to the poor-farm, and crossed Cleary's creek, which always rose with every rain, flooding the country surrounding for many yards. Supposing the flood rose to the poor-farm!

Virginia was drifting into an amusing little dreamlet where she saw Peter White ferrying

an odd-looking crowd of paupers over Cleary's creek in a big clothes basket, while they all endeavored, unsuccessfully, to get rid of an undesirable fellow-passenger in the shape of Sook, the red muley cow, who wore a green bonnet of Mrs. White's and held Bijah's immense patched umbrella between her and the pouring rain which pelted down its sides, drip, drip,—screet—click!

She was awake again, stretched prone in the apprehensive rigidity of fear. A key *had* turned in the lock across the room! She gave a little gasp, her hands clenched. There was nobody within six rooms of her. Mrs. Putnam's suite stretched across the front of the house down a long corridor from the wing where she was. If she screamed for help, there was none to hear. Charlotte, Viney and her husband, old Joe, slept down two flights, far in the rear. Only Boreus, from his mat in the hall, guarded the lower part of the house.

Virginia grasped at the thought of this help. If she could slip out of bed now and get out of the room, one whistle would bring the great animal bounding to her. It would be a brave man who would face the fangs of the big

hound: and Boreus had little liking for intruders.

But *was* it a man at the door? Or were Viney's half-whispered tales of the dark figure that haunted the empty rooms of Riverhouse in the dead of night by any fearful chance true, and this some restless spirit? Virginia, being a sensible, well-balanced girl, smiled at this fancy, even in her panic. It took muscle to turn stiff keys. Whoever was behind that door was flesh and blood like herself.

The door-knob was turned slowly, cautiously. Virginia's clenched hand pressed her cheek until the nails cut. Slowly, slowly the door began to open and a pale light to glimmer. It was too late now to think of flight; and just then a queer thing happened, for, with the very thought that all material means of help was cut off, came the whisper within,—“You are not alone. God is right here.” And with it the verse she had read to Charlotte:

“If Love be here,
I am aware
Evil and fear
Can be nowhere.”

Her tense muscles relaxed. A wonderful

sense of God's nearness and protecting care enwrapped her.

As the door swung back, letting in a pale gleam of light, a white bandaged hand fumbled about the stand, and a low voice exclaimed over the obstruction, which was shoved aside, striking the wall with a sharp rap.

Through her half-closed eyes, Virginia glimpsed a black form. Behind it, across the dusty floor, she could see a candle flickering in the draught from the dark opening beyond. The intruder was a woman. Virginia made out that. And she carried a long, glittering dagger in her hand. Almost involuntarily, a scream tried to force itself from the girl's stiff lips, but she turned resolutely from this awful sight and, burying her head in the pillow, took herself firmly in hand, saying to herself: "We shan't be afraid of the terror that walketh by night. The Lord is my refuge; whom shall I fear?" Then she made a little prayer that she might have that perfect love that casteth out fear.

Minutes passed, yet nothing disturbed her. She heard the rustle as the woman's skirt brushed the bed; but she seemed far away in

some little secure haven. And it didn't seem at all to matter that she was here on a stormy night in a lonely house out of hearing of the inmates with a "shadowy something" in her room that had a long knife in its hand. Virginia even began to be curious when it passed her on its way to the closet, and after fumbling there a moment bore something into the other room.

Virginia had been able to conquer fear; but it will take many turns of the wheel of evolution to iron curiosity out of the feminine breast. Stealthily she turned on her pillow and peeped into the dimly lighted room beyond, and there she saw a sight that made her gasp, indeed; for on the dusty floor trailed the fine gown of the Mistress of Riverhouse. Mrs. Putnam was stooping over some object, with a long dagger glancing in the light, and that object was—O, strangest of all the strange happenings of this night!—Virginia's old carpet-sack!

CHAPTER XXII

Too amazed to fear discovery, Virginia sat up and peeped through the half-opened door, rubbing her eyes hard and pinching her arm to wake herself from this nightmare; for she was persuaded that she was certainly in the midst of a most complicated dream. It was quite preposterous that the haughty mistress of Riverhouse should have entered the room of her little companion in the dead of night and should sit peering wildly into her ragged old carpet-sack!

But the thing stood the test, though her arm smarted sharply. Virginia sat rubbing the injured member while the scene before her remained unchanged. Still the stately lady of Riverhouse sat in the dust of the empty room; still the open door behind her yawned blackly, the candle on the floor in front of it flickering in the draught, and still she slashed at the tattered lining of the carpet-sack.

"Why, it's empty," Virginia thought con-

fusedly, pushing the stray locks from her hot little face and mentally making a short inventory of its late contents. The simple undergarments, the little bath-robe made of turkish toweling Aunt Louisy bought at a sale at the Emporium. Then there were the ebony comb and brush Clara had given her when her aunt sent her a silver toilet set. There was a work-box and a few trinkets; and that was all. There could be nothing among these plain articles worth a midnight search, there could be nothing worth inspection here, surely! Yet there did seem to be something worth while, for even as Virginia pondered perplexedly, Mrs. Putnam gave an exclamation of triumph—"Ah!"—and drew forth some little packets of papers. She opened one, shuddered, and flung it disdainfully to the floor. Another and another shared the same fate. It is bitter work to read letters to a successful rival. These were love messages from the son she had worshiped to the woman who had taken him from her.

The next told Delbert Putnam what had befallen his wife. Rebuffed by her grandfather and scorned by the neighbors, she was going in

search of work of some kind. The letter broke off incoherently in a tear-stained paragraph:—

“It is two months since I’ve had a letter, and no answer to the one about the child’s coming. O Del, have you forsaken me?”

The woman on the floor let her hand fall to her side. She had burned the letters her sick boy had entrusted to her care. This letter was not finished, for Mrs. Grannis had sent Ella Byrd away the night she wrote it, and she had found death waiting at the end of her black and bitter journey. Madam Putnam knew that, too. She bit her lip. Hot tears stood in her staring eyes, but she tossed her head impatiently. Was she turning soft-hearted thus late in the day? This was her own work; she had had her way. Ella Byrd had dared to come between two Putnams, to lay her common hands on the honor of a great name. Her life had paid the forfeit, and Cornelia Putnam had had her will.

Her will! What ailed her to-night? What was it which whispered that it was a wicked will; that had she not dragged her son South in an unhealthy season, he would have lived; that she had murdered not only the girl he loved so

dearly, but that her own impious hands had snuffed out the life which she, herself, with pangs unspeakable, had given?

Ere Peter's disclosure of the marriage, she had taken bitter comfort in charging her boy's death to a wanton woman. Now the woman was his wife. The wife of a Putnam dying in a poor-house! Why, the child was her own grandchild—her own flesh and blood! Cornelia Putnam gasped. She hadn't thought of that before, when she wished the girl dead. She sat stiff and frowning, now and then passing an impatient hand over her eyes, as if trying to brush away the clouds of hate and passion hitherto obscuring her sight. What was it the girl had sung?

"Thou wilt bind the stubborn will,
Wound the callous breast;
Make self-righteousness be still,
Break earth's stupid rest."

She frantically beat her bandaged hand in the dust. Rest? God knows no rest had come to her! Rest? Did she hear a voice whispering, "There *is* no rest for the wicked"? Her heart leaped, and she gazed apprehensively behind

her into the darkness. Had some one approached from the hall? She shivered, little imagining that Virginia sat near, gazing at her with fearful eyes. Cornelia Putnam was thinking of the dead, not of the living.

Gathering her wandering thoughts with an effort, and bending all her strong will to regain her self-control, she went on sorting the letters, until with a cry she seized upon a thicker, larger billet, and opening it with shaking fingers, held it toward the guttering candle.

There was the stained printed form of a marriage license, and there before her smarting eyes stood the names, in the crabbed script of old Squire Brazzel, "Delbert Calloway Putnam" and "Ella Byrd."

At last! At last! Now the threats of Peter were void! Now her fortune was safe! This poor-house brat should never own River-house. No one could prove that Virginia of the poor-farm was Delbert Putnam's legal heir!

She reached excitedly toward the candle. A flame, a puff of smoke, and all her troubles would have vanished!

What was that sound? Ere she could turn,

there was a stealthy footfall behind her. The candle-stick went over, the light dying as it fell. The guilty woman felt a cold touch upon her cheek, a breath on her face.

“My God, the dead *do* return!”

With a shriek she repulsed the form towering over her in the blackness, and fell crashing into the dust as the candle had fallen.

CHAPTER XXIII

Virginia was not frightened. Springing from her bed, she lit her lamp, and snapping her fingers, called commandingly, "Here, sir, here!" For she had seen the shaggy head of Boreus thrust in from the darkness behind Mrs. Putnam, and knew that the dog, awakened by the light and movement about the house, had come upstairs to investigate.

It took Virginia but a moment to reach the stricken woman, and to somehow get her upon her own bed. Then she picked up the scattered documents, and bundling them into the carpet-sack, threw it back into her closet. She decided that this room must be shut up and all traces of the midnight visit hidden, and calmly went about it, speedily brushing the dust from Madam's garments and disposing of the candle and paper-knife. Then she rang her bell hard and long, and soon the shuffling of feet told her that Viney and Charlotte were hurrying upstairs.

When Virginia told them that she had found

Madam outside her door, they began to whimper, looking at the white, insensible face, and crying that their mistress was dead; but the girl reassured them and finally prevailed on them to carry Mrs. Putnam to her own room, going before the half-dressed servants with their somber burden.

Glancing at the calm young lady preceding them, Viney confided to Charlotte: "She acts jes like ole Mis' herself so high an' mighty. An' when she stamp her foot an' holler 'stop that cryin',' she look for all de world like her, too."

When Madam Putnam was safely in bed, Viney went below to wake Joe, who was surely a lineal descendant of one of the Seven Sleepers, for the noise of Virginia's bell, Charlotte's frantic pounding on their door, and even the hoarse commands of his old woman, had failed to rouse him.

When Mrs. Putnam began to regain consciousness, Virginia hurried back to her room to get into something warm, for the air was chill after the storm and she was all a-tremble with cold and excitement.

She placed her lamp on the table and turned

to her closet. As she opened the door, the papers and gripsack fell out, and bethinking herself for the first time in all this confusion that the letters must have been her mother's, Virginia gathered them up and stood in the lamp-light, with her pretty hair falling over her night-dress, reading her mother's marriage license. That her father was Delbert Putnam, the son of the proud old woman in there on the bed, and heir to all her wealth, never occurred to Virginia. Her father had been like some mythological personage, but her mother was a real, vital being; loved, pitied and mourned sincerely through all her life. The girl's cheek flushed and her eyes brimmed with tears. Claspng her hands over the creased paper, she fell on her knees and buried her face on the chair.

"O, Divine Love, I thank thee! My dear Mamma was good—good! I am so happy—so happy!"

In the dimly lighted room down the corridor, Cornelia Putnam struggled in a sitting position.

"Didn't I burn it?" she queried sharply. "Where are the papers, Charlotte?"

Charlotte spoke soothingly. She had had like experiences with her neurotic patient before, and believed this to be one of her old sleep-walking attacks.

"There, there now, Madam; there warn't none at all. We all found you in a faint on Miss Virginia's bed. Warn't nothin' there, Mam, at all. I took you off myself, and me and Viney brunged you in here."

"The door! I forgot to lock it. Of course I must have waked the girl," muttered the lady. "What was it touched me, Charlotte?" she queried petulantly. "Did you or Vine come up behind me from the hall?"

"For Lord's sake, honey, lay still," said the servant, beginning to sponge her face and hands with lavender water, "Me and Viney was soun' asleep. It's after three o'clock, and youse been walkin' in yo' sleep, an' fell over in Miss Virginia's hall. How'd you cut your hand?" And Charlotte began to unwrap the handkerchief.

Mrs. Putnam twisted away from her. "It's but a scratch," she said impatiently. "Take that lavender away; it nauseates me. Where is the girl? Did she have papers in her hand

when you came in? Was the red room door open?"

Charlotte patiently replaced her basin and smoothed the pillows behind her mistress, still speaking in the caressing tones one uses toward an ailing child.

"There warn't no papers nor nuffin; the red room door is tight shet, Mam. You know it ain't been open for ten years, and nobody but you don't have the keys.

"She must have secreted them, then," muttered Mrs. Putnam. "Go send her here."

"For the land's sake, Mis' 'Nelia, youse actin' like you was a little gal agin. I member Mammy sayin' onct you wanted to get up in the middle of the night an' have yo' pa read you 'Red Ridin' Hood,' an' how you got the whole house up, an' yo' ma threatened to use her slipper on you. You pa put on his dressin' gown an' came to the nursery and read it. He sho' did." Charlotte chuckled. "You sho' are actin' like that, Mam! Shan't I give you some wine an' you lay down an' get a nap o' sleep? It's after three, an' the roosters am be-ginnin' to crow an' that young lady's asleep by now. I done told her this was only one of yo'

ole spells, an' that you always took a glass of sherry and went off like a lamb after 'em."

Charlotte clinked the glass against the decanter invitingly. She had taken it from a cabinet as she talked of old times.

Outside lay the inky darkness preceding dawn. From the distant barnyard came the shrill, thin sound of Uncle Joe's roosters. The servant, with her skirt hooked awry over her coarse nightgown, cast a vague, blotchy shadow against the wall as she came toward the bed. Mrs. Putnam felt strangely weak. Charlotte's voice sounded faint and far away, like the crowing of the fowls.

"Right. I'd better not see her now. She knows everything, and must not guess I think she has the papers," she muttered sleepily. "Very well, Charlotte, bring the wine. I'll get the papers yet. The papers—" She lifted the glass to her lips and was half asleep almost before Charlotte could set her bed to rights and go to her own pallet.

"Madam is sho' losin' her mind. She's got papers on the brain. I wonder what she thought she saw in that hall? Viney always

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did say this here house was hanted. But ole Miss is powerful strong-minded to be scared by anything. Un huh, I wonder what it was she saw."

CHAPTER XXIV

For a week Indian River had been brimming; roaring over the Sedgebury dam like a half-sized Niagara, and covering the lowlands and meadows about North Sedgebury, where the Union Pacific was ballasting its tracks down-river and where the current was eroding the dirt-banks and dropping fences here and there into the swirling water; but although the water-gauge had long stood at the danger line, no one felt uneasy, for the river had many tributaries from the Wichita mountains and often rose to the mill floodgates.

The morning after the big storm, Sedgebury was aroused by the cry, "The north pier of the bridge is crumbling!" Across the brown flood the gathering crowd could see the bulge and curve of the pier, and suddenly, with a quiver and a roar, the north end of the bridge dropped, amid a great wrenching and tearing of beams and splintering of wood.

Over the river, down the tracks, came the long-drawn "toot" of an engine in distress, and the freight men could be seen, like ants, black against the station's wall, rolling freight to the east platform, for further up the river the water had crossed the space lying between the tracks and the stream, and now came pouring down into North Sedgebury—a river in itself, growing deeper and wider with every hour.

Houses on the bank were caving and dropping. Excited, shrieking people ran up and down. The torrent was full of debris. Now a dog floated past on a remnant of a porch, howling mournfully. A shanty roof with two women on it swept along, and, with a cry, men ran this way and that to such boats as had not been carried away; but their endeavors were futile, for ere they could put off the roof had dropped over the great wall of the dam, like a chip in a gutter, and when it rose from its plunge but one form clung limply against it, crying faintly as it sailed from sight. Some one rushed to the telegraph, but the people of the next town had a forty-eight-hour struggle on their own hands, and the woman was never found.

People with friends in North Sedgebury walked about the streets weeping; though, as the day wore on, the situation was somewhat mitigated by one brave fellow who, in his launch, risked his life over and over again to rescue the refugees.

By noon the crew abandoned their train and waded, waistdeep, to the station, whence Demsy Barns, the launch owner, finally brought them all off safely, with the plucky station men who stayed by the company's property until the platforms were under water and it was five feet deep in the freight rooms.

A few men, more venturous than the rest, rowing upstream from below the dam, finally landed in the woods half a mile from the village, thus saving a few people after a long tramp through ankle-deep mud. Many refugees came clad in their night-clothes, with all their effects and property swirling down the river in front of them.

By night the power-plant was under water, so that only the lanterns and the glare of bonfires blotched the black with crimson.

By ten o'clock a section of the dam went out, and a little later the wall of the mill

crashed down. The miller, a saturnine elderly man, saw the work and savings of years melt away; but he only squared his lean jaw and steadied the lantern which he held, to light the ware-house where mill-hands and citizens were removing the sacked flour to the wagons in the street. Perhaps he did pale a little under his grizzled beard; but he made no comment.

The farmers of the poor-farm neighborhood organized a relief committee, with Peter White as chairman, for, despite his unpopularity, his executive ability and energy were always recognized. Drawing upon the supplies of the farm he sent them and such stuff as the farmers collected to North Sedgebury by wagon, and, taking two young fellows with him, rode ahead as fast as possible, thinking there would be little to do but to assure the flood sufferers that food and clothing were on the way. But by the time they reached the railway station they found plenty of work cut out for them.

Half a mile down the track a half-score of shanties stood on a little hill, where a colony of laborers and fishermen lived. These were mostly negroes and Mexicans who, with char-

acteristic indifference, had sat on their rickety porches watching the water running through their back yards. They were so accustomed to the river which gave them livelihood that they felt no fear of it even in this furious mood, and, though warned to abandon their homes at midnight, they still sat in sociable groups smoking and chatting, though at daylight some, more cautious than others, had waded to the river bank and brought up a skiff, or a row-boat, which here and there rocked at a porch post.

But alas for their childlike trust! Just at noon a negro noticed that his kitchen floor was a-slant, and that the water outside the window was no longer a pool, but a current. With a cry of warning he loaded his family into his skiff and put off from his porch—none to soon, for as they pulled away, the little slab-house heaved upward and sidewise and went down with a gentle splash into ten feet of water. The current had washed in and the river was rolling over "Shanty-town."

As Peter and his friends were tying their horses the cries of these people attracted their attention. Peter was walking somewhat un-

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steadily, for, rising early and getting under way in a cold drizzle, he had had frequent recourse to his hip pocket, where he kept his flask. Since the assault on Sands, Peter's secret habit was growing, and he always kept his brown flask well filled.

One of the farmers pointed up the track where the people stood on the promontory, calling and waving their arms.

"Come on, feller, we can make it on the trestle. Peter, take that rope offen that pile of freight. We'll haul them niggers and greasers up in no time."

"You betcher!" shouted Peter. "I guess three huskies like us can pull up a dozen or two light-weights as easy as Jim can rope a steer."

They ran up the track and onto the bridge. The owners of boats were quick to understand their intention and to row to the piles. Here they swarmed up, sending the skiff to and fro until all had been brought off, and, with the help of the three men, the whole colony was soon marching in a tatterdemalion procession over the trestle. The two other farmers accompanied their protégés, but Peter, who felt stiff and heavy-headed, lingered, sitting on the

trestle with his mud-caked boots hanging over and his rope-blistered hands laid out on the rails behind him. It was about time for the relief-wagon to come in, so he took out the flask for one more nip before starting back. But the bottle was empty, so with a disappointed sigh, he threw it away, and, leaning heavily on one arm, was preparing to rise when a plaintive cry from the water attracted his attention.

Ten feet from the trestle swam a small dog. He panted as he swam, and now and then gave a feeble yelp. His strength was failing, but he was making a gallant fight. Peter liked dogs, and as he caught sight of the rope that was still knotted about him, it gave him an idea. He staggered to his feet, and, with befuddled care, slipped down from the ties and groped with his feet for the beam. Safely there, he swung himself under, and, with legs locked about the trestle supports, noosed his rope and leaned forward for a throw at the dog, calling him as he leaned. But the beam was slippery, and Peter had forgotten to untie the rope from his waist. The dog, with his whimpering wail, floated past and was gone,

and the overseer, with a guttural cry, and a wild clutch at the ties just out of reach above him, fell head over heels into the brown water.

He came up with a gurgling gasp, sobered by the plunge. It was years since he had swam, yet, instinctively, he struck out into the old stroke he had learned as a boy. But the rope was about his arms, and, missing the piles, he, like the dog, was swept into the river's current. He caught a far-away glimpse of the ruined mill. The roar of the dam drowned his cries. For a few moments he called and struggled, and then the river laid its cold hand on his mouth and stilled it, and rocked him to sleep on its undulating brown breast.

CHAPTER XXV

The flood that took Peter White from his poor-farm and paupers threatened another life besides. Riverhouse stood on a mile-long peninsula, and, had it been more than an insignificant ditch, Cleary's creek, cutting across Sedgebury road, would have made an island of it.

The day after the flood, however, Cleary's creek was insignificant no longer. It stretched, a deep, swift stream, between Riverhouse and civilization,—fifteen miles to Delmas and ten to Sedgebury. It might as well have been the Ark upon the diluvian waters, for the telephone poles had sunk into the mud here and there, and they were cut off from the world.

There were plenty of provisions in the house, chickens in the barn-yard and flour in the bin; so that they did not want for the creature comforts. But Madam Putnam was delirious af-

ter her exciting night, and seemed to be sinking rapidly. Charlotte had emptied the last of the medicine she habitually took, into her early drink of sherry. Her physician had long since warned Madam Putnam that a severe strain would prove fatal and cautioned her to keep on hand a powerful remedy in case of an accident. This was in the vial Madam had broken in her anger the night before; and it seemed likely that she would pay dearly for her temper.

Charlotte wrung her hands as she walked up and down the portico, before which Joe sat dejectedly on horse-back, gnawing his lips under his stubby white mustache. Charlotte called him names that reflected upon his bravery and his loyalty to the house of Putnam.

"T'se 'clare to God, Charlotte, this mar couldn't swim across that water if she was ten-year old instead of twenty; an' twon't do ole Miss no good, nohow, to drown dead this po' ole nigger. Dar jes ain't a way in the world we can get over without a boat; an' whut's the use of yo' 'busin' me, gal? I ain't got no boat, you-all knows that!" And Uncle Joe moved off toward the barn, his voice rising to a squeak

of protest, though Charlotte's sobs brought the tears to his old eyes.

Just then Virginia came down the stairway, fresh and rosy in her blue chambray gown. Perhaps she held her head a bit higher than she had last night; perhaps the pride of race sparkled in her eyes and lifted her foot with a firmer tread; but her heart was the heart of a happy child, and had been lifted up since her awakening in a song of praise and gratitude. Her happiness bubbled to her lips in a wordless little melody as she ran out to look at the weather, nearly upsetting Charlotte, who was coming up the steps with her apron over her face.

"O, Miss Virginia," she sobbed excitedly, "Madam's drops is all gone, an' she is in one of her sinkin' spells an' that low-down ole nigger says he can't get 'cross the water that's over the road, an' the telephone won't work. O my Master! Chile, my Madam sho' goin' ter go this here time. A screech owl was a-whimperin' on the barn-comb when Joe went out this mornin', an' that dog woke me up a-howlin' twice!" And Charlotte subsided on the doorstep in a limp, shaking heap.

Virginia's heart gave a throb. Then she shut her eyes a moment and stood silently behind the weeping servant. When she opened them again, there was a grave smile on her lips, though they were firmly resolute. She remembered that she was the last of the Putnams and that her grandmother lay upstairs beyond the reach of human aid or material remedies.

The Master said that as little children we must come into his kingdom. This child's mind, wide open to the influences of heaven, had grasped the spiritual lessons of the summer. Her retentive memory had caught, and her trusting heart had believed and demonstrated in small ways, the truth that frees mankind from pain.

"God's is the only power there is, and that power is the power that heals all our diseases," Virginia reasoned, and her fear dropped away from her like withered oak-leaves when spring comes.

"Charlotte, can't you trust her to Love?" she asked softly. "Don't you remember what we have studied since I came here? Mrs. Putnam's life is in God's hands, and the Bible says

'to know Him aright is life eternal,' and we are commanded to not be faithless, but believing."

Charlotte stopped crying and lifted her dark face to the fair one above her, beaming with hope and faith. Into her mind there flashed the picture of Jacob with his head on his pillow and the angels bending from the starlit sky to smile into his world-weary face.

"Does you believe that sho', honey,—that without them drops Madam can live and get well? That it don't make no difference whether we-all can get word to the doctor or not; that the good Lord will cure her 'thouten anything?"

"Why, yes," answered the girl simply. "You know that any law that is a real law can't ever change. Two twos are four, and twenty twos are forty; it's only more of the same kind of numbers. You know the truth healed me, Charlotte, when they said I was dying; and I've proved the rule every day since in little things. 'The Lord is my refuge . . . whom shall I fear?' That means we shan't be afraid of anything, but trust His word and know he does everything well. Why, see, here's my book, Charlotte. This is the lesson

for this morning. I have just read it. It's on Truth."

Sitting down on the door-step, with the gray, rain-drenched landscape before her and the water all about them, Virginia read softly and clearly:

"The word of the Lord is right; and all His works are done in truth. The eye of the Lord is upon them that fear Him, upon them that hope in His mercy *to deliver their soul from death and to keep them alive*. The Lord is our help and our shield; for our heart shall rejoice in Him because we have trusted in His Holy Name."

Rising, she closed the little book, Charlotte followed her into the hall, reassured by the calm certainty of her tone. Del Putnam's child had come into her own, and, with the gallant courage of her race, stood ready to fight even death.

"Go back to Mrs. Putnam, Charlotte, while I drink a cup of coffee. And it doesn't matter whatever seems the matter with her, or what happens, hold firm to the thought that God is the great physician and will care for Madam better than any doctor ever can."

All that day Virginia sat beside her grandmother, with her Bible and the commentary in hand, marveling, as page after page was turned, that she came upon words which seemed to suit the case before her so exactly and helped her to a more thorough understanding of the reality of spiritual being and life.

At noon, Charlotte tiptoed in with a tray of luncheon, and the girl ate hungrily, though she was not conscious of wearying in her watch. When the daylight merged into night and the candles were brought, the color of the mask-like face upon the pillow was brighter, the dark shadows had vanished from about the sunken eyes, and by evening the patient could swallow a little broth.

By twelve, all lights were out but one. Charlotte, who had followed Virginia's instructions implicitly all the long day, was fast asleep on her pallet in a corner, and the girl began her night watch with grateful heart, for Mrs. Putnam slept quietly, with a faint pink tinting her cheeks, and after a while Virginia slept, too, her rosy cheek resting on her Bible.

At daylight Charlotte roused herself, and,

with the guilty consciousness of duty neglected, tiptoed to the bed. With clasped hands, she silently expressed her thankfulness, and then slipped away to the kitchen, where Viney and Joe sat sadly before the crackling range.

As she entered they looked up apprehensively, quickly breaking into smiles of relief as they saw encouragement in Charlotte's bright eyes and wide mouth. And there was such a hugging and crying for joy between the women, and a "Bless de Lord"-ing from Uncle Joe, that Charlotte, the first to recover her composure, put her fingers on her lips, fearful that their rejoicing might disturb the sleepers upstairs.

"I knowed it, I knowed it!" chanted Aunt Viney, her face a-beam under its scarlet bandanna, as she went happily about getting breakfast. "I knowed it, Charlotte," she crooned, as she moulded her light rolls. "Praise be! Them astys I brung in from the garden to decorate de room wif dis mornin', if she passed in the night, all wilted in the heat of the kitchen. Dat good fo' nothin' Joe done forgot to set 'em in the windersill. I got up in the night to pray for ole Miss, an' I noticed

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they was all droopin', an' I says, 'Viney, woman, dat's a sign yo' pore ole Miss is goin'; but Joe got up early an' put 'm in cold water, an' when I looked in that bucket again to throw 'em out, dar dey was, a-noddin' to me in the sunrise as sassy as you please, an' de day a-dawnin' clear behind 'em through the win-der. An' I went an' holler to Joe out de back door, 'Praise be, Joe, de flowers hab picked up. Ole Miss's a-goin' to live!'

CHAPTER XXVI

When Mrs. Putnam came to herself and was able to think again, she was amazed to find that Virginia was in charge of her, and that she had rallied from one of her old terrifying attacks with no medicine or medical attendance. By the time the waters were down, and communication opened, Charlotte had told her story and kindled a spark in the heart of the mistress—faint and tremulous at first, but a tiny fire of faith and love that, fed by Virginia's tender care and a growing knowledge of the faith that was in her, bade fair to bring the light of joy and peace into that once desolate place.

Miss Duncan now came out twice a week from Delmas, and under her ministration Cornelia Putnam found herself restored to a health and vigor she had thought gone with youth. With this, too, came a fading away of all the ugly thoughts that had haunted her.

Some weeks after her illness she heard of

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Peter's death, and later knew that the will was destroyed with him; but Virginia had come into her own by then, and sang unafraid through the dark corridors of Riverhouse.

It all came about simply, without a tragic scene, as the big things of life seem to.

A week after the storm, Cornelia Putnam sat up in bed. Virginia had been reading to her. They sat quietly in the sunny chamber, with little Dicky, a happy fluff of golden down, singing from his cage in the window. Peace and harmony seemed to flow in upon her like a blessed river, washing away all bitterness, as she mused on the wonderful truth that Love is supreme, and that God's law is a law of life, not of death,—of harmony, not of discord.

Mrs. Putnam spoke suddenly, her pale cheek flushing.

"My dear," she said gently, "did you find any papers on the red-room floor the night I frightened you so?"

Virginia paled a little, but her eyes were steady as they met the inscrutable glance of the elder woman across the table.

"Yes, Ma'am. I put them back in the old carpet-sack. They are in my closet."

"Then you know who you are?"

The girl nodded. The blood rushed to her cheeks; she could not speak, nor glance at the worn face so near.

"Child, can you forgive a wicked old woman?"

The low voice broke suddenly, and the haughty head was bowed.

Rising, Virginia ran around the table, and, falling on her knees with her hand on the tremulous clasped ones, she raised her lips to kiss the tear-furrowed cheek, and without a word was clasped in her grandmother's arms.

The next day, Virginia, hugging her secret, wrote to Miss Louisy with many mysterious hints that "something was going to happen," and that she was to come straight out to Riverhouse as soon as she got off the cars. For Virginia intended that she and her grandmother should adopt Aunt Louisy and make her "perfectly happy forever afterward."

September's goldenrod yellowed the grasses along the Sedge county roads. Thistledown floated airily across the browning fields, and the fine gossamer of cobwebs laced the air. The first frost had just pinched the maples with

red here and there, and there was a scent of burning stubble, and that indefinable autumn perfume which draws a sweetly gentle sadness in its wake. September was waning with its rounding harvest moon. The woods about Riverhouse were kaleidoscopic with autumn's colorings; the crickets sang loud and shrill beneath the evergreens on its lawn, and they had heard the harsh cry of wild ducks coming down to them from the purpling twilight sky.

The afternoon of the year found things unchanged at Riverhouse—that is, outwardly. It still stood with blotched red walls in the golden autumn sunlight. The peacock still cried stridently from the terrace, and the Triton still blew his conch shell into the fountain. But somehow the sunshine seemed to shine inside, too, and now there was real music sounding through the stately rooms, for a fresh young voice rang there and a light step echoed down its once silent halls. An energetic hand flung wide the long-closed shutters, and light and life came in together, banishing the shadows from the great old house and from its mistress' face.

Mrs. Putnam sat one afternoon waiting for

Virginia. A great brass bowl of asters—purple, pink and snowy-petaled—glowed in a corner of the sunlit drawing-room. The grand piano gave back glints of the flowers, and the dancing flames in the grate banished the autumn chill, as love's miracle had banished the hatred and sorrow of the placid woman who sat musing pleasantly, a stately figure in a soft lavender gown with rare laces at throat and wrist.

Through the archway into the hall the sunshine came pouring through the sidelights. From the window beside her, Madam Putnam looked upon Viney's garden, and the bent forms of the old woman and Joe as they gathered sweet peppers and cut late squashes from the vines; while Charlotte, rake in hand, stood on the lawn like some Egyptian priestess, outlined against the yellow light, with the smoke from a leaf fire wreathing about her and floating through the window. It seemed to Madam Putnam's soothed senses to be incense, and Charlotte's homely task took on the dignity of a rite.

Smiling at her fancy, she glanced toward the clock above the crackling logs. It was surely

time for her girl to come home! Then between the rampant griffins at the gate a shaggy streak of gray flew up the drive, with ecstatic bark and clumsy gambols. Running lightly after it came Virginia, scarlet-clad, face aglow in the golden light, waving a cheery greeting.

Tears of joy dimmed Cornelia Putnam's eyes as the door opened and she came in, with the pungent breath of autumn in her wake, seeming to scatter the sweetness and light of God's outdoors about her.

"Were you lonely, Grandmother dear?" she cried, laying a little brown hand caressingly on the lavender silk shoulder. "What have you been doing all the afternoon alone? I walked further than I intended. It is so glorious in the woods now."

"I have been thinking, like Uncle Tom, of my mercies, dearest, and reading a little, too."

Virginia smiled to note the open Bible on the table.

"Read what I have marked," said her grandmother, "and see why I have thought so of my mercies and thanked God for my child."

The book of Isaiah lay open, and, standing

behind her, Virginia read, while the fire crackled and the autumn scents pervaded the peaceful, sunlit room,—

“The Lord has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted and to proclaim the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to comfort all that mourn, to give them beauty for ashes and the oil of joy for mourning.”

THE END

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